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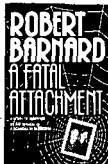
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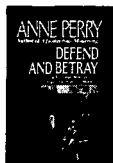
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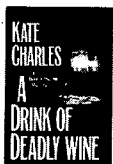
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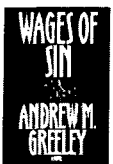
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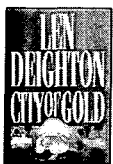
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

A few months ago, in this column, we mentioned that we are always in the market for Mysterious Photograph submissions from our readers. We have greatly enjoyed the photos that have been sent in as a result—a number of readers took action on our request, and the mail brought some engaging and intriguing responses.

For instance, the Mysterious Photograph in this issue. And issues to come will have more.

We have two writers to introduce to you this time. Journalist Thelma C. Sokoloff, author of "Memory of a Murder," has written some two dozen articles for the *New York Times* and *Newsday* and has also written for *The Writer*, *TWA Ambassa-*

dor, and *Holiday*. Her first short story, "Providence Will Provide," was published in EQMM and reprinted in the *Mystery Writers of America's* anthology *Last Laughs* (1986). She is also a world traveler and a collector of oceanic and African art and American crafts.

Steve Corwin, author of "Hot Oil," is a tree farmer. Currently, that is; he has had a varied career. His photographs of the Russian invasion of Prague in 1968 appeared in *Newsweek*; he spent time in a kibbutz in Israel on the Lebanese border, "in pistolshot of the Golan Heights"; he spent seventeen years on the *San Jose Mercury News* where he "participated as a minor editor

(continued on page 104)

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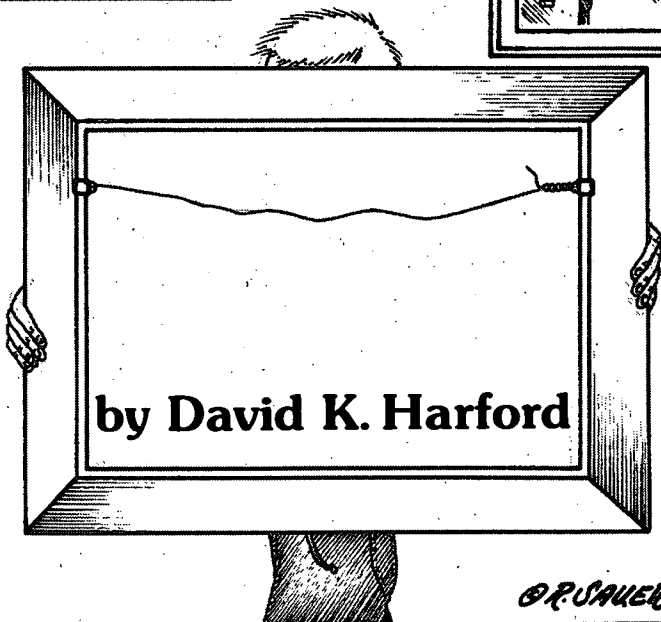
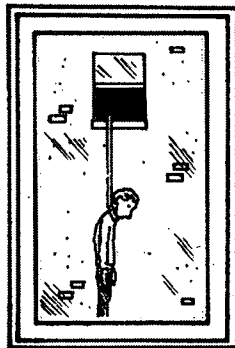
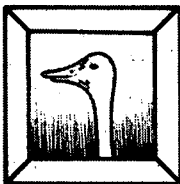
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FICTION

Calves in the Barn on a Monday Morn



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We should never have strayed outside. Thinking back on it now, we (Lew, my younger brother, and me) should never have strayed outside the straight, honest life and ventured into crime. I should have heeded Pa's words. But at the time, what could we do? Laid off up in north Pennsylvania from Bradford Meats & Provisions; the economy in shambles 'cause the bottom fell all out of the domestic oil business up there and so jobs, even measly minimum wage jobs, was as scarce as trees on a desert. No jobs, no money, and me having to feed and take care of Lew best I could. Lew can't take care of himself hardly, being a little slow and at seventeen years old not having quite as much savvy as someone like me, two years older, had.

So I was desperate for us and more or less opened a door and let the word out to the right criminal types: we was for hire. First time I ever done anything like that, first time I ever went the crime route, but we was trapped financially, like I tell you. At least *I* felt trapped. Lew didn't, maybe. I don't think he has ever felt trapped any time in his life. There *is* some saving grace, I suppose, in being like Lew—not being able to talk, your mind forever wandering through a quiet, grassy piece of natural freedom.

Even though I had only lived in the city a couple of years, I knew there was certain places on the streets a guy could get word out, places only street people and the police know about, and I knew there was really only two major families within the city that might be doing a little, shall we say, hiring. And I didn't really care much which family we worked for, but I never expected we'd end up working for both. Well, kind of.

Yes, sir, straying out the door by letting the word out we was for hire and then opening the front door of our apartment that cold, rainy Saturday morning is what really got us where we are today, Lew and me.

Lew was watching cartoons and playing with his fingers, like he always does when he's bored. He kind of puts his hands together like he's praying, folds his two middle fingers over and then twists his wrists so that only the middle fingers stick out, and then he wiggles these. I taught him this game. But sometimes he gets fouled up and twists his hands the wrong way and sits there making little gurgling noises because he's bending his own fingers in a way they wasn't meant to bend. But he was

doing this, gurgling and giggling at an old Roadrunner cartoon, when someone rapped at the door.

It kind of startled me at first when I opened it. He was a whole lot bigger in real life than he was when you saw him on the news on TV, usually trailing only a step or two behind his boss. But there he was now, standing as close and as big as a storm door and looking down at me with hard little ball-bearing eyes. He pushed past me in a way you'd have thought he was the landlord looking for past rent. But that's how Frankie the Finger Something-or-other-that-ended-with-a-vowel liked to greet people, like you owed him something and he was about to rip it out of you. Anyway, there he was, no denying it, bigger and meaner than life, Frankie the Finger, Vinnie the Vice's right-hand man. Vinnie the Vice heads one of the families I was telling you about.

Careful not to muss his herringbone suit jacket under his London Fog overcoat, Frankie walked around the apartment, stiff, pulling at his cuffs, pulling at his tie. His aftershave could choke a horse. His jaw moved slowly, like a hunk of precision grinding machinery, when he spoke.

"Word has it you might be looking for a little work," Frankie the Finger said to me.

Them ball-bearing eyes just rolled over me, up and down. He smiled a lot, but in a way you knew he didn't mean it. He'd probably be smiling the same way the same moment he was putting a bullet behind your ear. "That's the word," I told him, trying to stare him down, trying to sound cocksure of myself, but feeling all mushy from my eyeballs back. I mean, Frankie being there—that was *bigtime*, and I was nervous. "You got something?"

"Maybe," he says. "Maybe. This the kid?" He tilts his head in a mechanical way towards Lew, and I can hear the starch in his collar crack.

I tell him his name's Lew and we was not only brothers but partners.

Frankie the Finger's smile changes, like now he was enjoying a private joke about Lew and me. He strolled around the apartment some more still picking at his cuffs, pawed at a couple of cheap ceramic knickknacks we had sitting around, moved the deck of Old Maid cards me and Lew play all the time, and then stepped up to Lew's velvet painting of Mother Goose hanging on the living room wall. Lew has a thing about geese. Frankie sneered at the painting, then turned and said, "I told Vinnie you probably were ones who

appreciated fine art." He jerked his thumb back at the velvet painting, smiling privately still. "Them boys from up north, I told Vinnie, they know fine art when they see it," Frankie said.

I was a little surprised he knew we was from up north Pennsylvania, but I tried not to show this surprise.

"You lived in Bradford for fifteen years," Frankie went on, as if he'd just read my mind. "Worked for a food wholesaler there. Roomed at a place just inside town. You beat them out of rent when you left." He clicked his tongue, *tsk tsk*, pretending to disapprove of the rent thing. "Your brother here's a bit of a mule."

It seemed we'd been checked out thoroughly, but I kind of resent the crack about Lew. "He can take care of him—"

"We know you aren't the heat," Frankie continued, glancing over at Lew, who was just sitting there trying to absorb it all. "Definitely not the heat. So we got a little job for you. It'll take you back upstate where you're familiar with things."

He was nearing to what brought him to us, and I was getting antsy all over, wondering what it was.

"Vinnie wants you to steal a piece of fine art for him," Frankie said.

"Sure. Sure. We can do that." I wasn't sure whether we could or not or what we was getting into, but I was kind of relieved to know we wasn't gonna be killing nobody. Someone told me once that Vinnie the Vice's idea of morning exercise was to take someone out. And I don't mean "take him out" for breakfast or out for a walk, either. "Just tell me what you want done," I told Frankie in my steadiest, cocksure voice, even though I was still queasy and all Jell-O inside, like being on a first date. "What's he want lifted and how much is he paying?" seemed to me to be logical questions.

"There's an oil painting in a small art museum in Bradford. The Bradford Fine Arts Museum. Know where it's at?" He was leaning against the wall now, arms folded, watching me closely.

I knew where the museum was, and I told him. Big three story stone house on Congress Street. Once owned by an early oil family. It had been converted into a small art museum for several years, run by a man named Conway. Big high stone fence around the place, too. Iron gates locked tight at night. "What painting in particular are we talking about?" I asked Frankie, feeling relaxed enough to pull out my first cigarette. I hoped to give him that impression anyway, even if I wasn't relaxed altogether.

"This painting is by a woman named Juanita Garcia. You'll

recognize it. It'll be the worse piece of garbage you ever set eyes on. *Calves in the Barn on a Monday Morn.*" Frankie laughed, a genuine, hearty laugh this time, and he repeated the name of the painting, "*Calves in the Barn on a Monday Morn.* There's to be an art show at the Bradford Fine Arts Museum next week, and Vinnie wants you two to make sure Juanita Garcia's so-called art is not represented. Think of it as a public health service you'll be performing," Frankie said. "You'll be helping to clean up unwanted garbage."

It sounded easy enough although my head was swimming with questions I knew was better left unasked. Who was Juanita Garcia? Why was Vinnie the Vice so interested in a painting that was "a piece of garbage"? Was the family into stolen art, too? And what was I to do with it after I stole it?

Frankie answered the last question without my having to ask it. "Bring the painting back here. When I pick it up, I'll see to it you're justly compensated. Vinnie's a union man all the way. He's been in the unions for a long time. He believes in a fair wage for a fair day's work."

"How much?" I asked.

"Five G's."

When I swallowed hard, I swallowed most of those unasked questions. Five grand? That was a lot of cabbage for a piece of garbage. But I wasn't gonna argue or question nothing. If we could pull this off, and I saw no reason we couldn't, knowing Bradford the way I do, not only would Lew and me be set financially but we'd also be right up there, possibly right on top of Vinnie the Vice's hiring list...

Frankie pushed off from the wall and held up his right hand, and I could see he was missing his middle finger at the second knuckle. His ball-bearing eyes rolled over both Lew and me, slowly and deliberately; and suddenly there wasn't a trace of humor or good nature anywhere on Frankie's face. "But don't come back without that painting," he said in a well-measured voice, low and meaningful. He picked up a small ceramic goose (Lew's favorite knickknack) from the coffee table, and with one powerful grip of his right hand Frankie the Finger crushed it and then wiped the broken pieces of ceramic off his hand and onto my shirt. "Come back without that painting and the next thing I crush will be your larynx. Vinnie the Vice doesn't understand failure; it's not in his dictionary. So if you can't get that painting, you better keep travel-

ing north, up through Canada, across the North Pole and down the other side of the earth. *Capish?*”

I swallowed hard again, imagining trying to swallow without a throat.

I “capished.”

I’m not sure Lew did, though. He was too busy pawing through the broken bits of his ceramic goose, near tears.

We was making the six hour trip up north the next Monday in a car that had, at best, two good starts left in it. I had been wanting to trade the old clunker in, but after I lost my job, I had to make do the best I could with it. To make matters worse, the farther north we traveled, the more the rain turned to sleet, then to snow. By the time we was climbing the mountains twenty miles out of Bradford, nearing our destination, we was in the middle of a heavy, mid-November snowstorm, slushy, slick, wet. And me with no snow tires on.

The entire trip up, the car wheezed, coughed, and spit worse than my pa in his final days. No doubt about it, the old Chevy was terminally ill. I didn’t dare shut it off. Even filling up for gas, I had to have Lew hold his foot on the gas pedal so the car wouldn’t stall while I worked the gas pump outside.

We left on our little jaunt early Monday morning, hoping to get into Bradford in the afternoon, case the museum a bit, wait till late evening, and then make the heist. But the snow, slow traffic, and lack of power in the car slip-sliding around slowed us down considerably.

By six o’clock (and dark already) we was on the last leg. Lew slept most the way up, and occasionally I’d reach over to where he was lying curled in the front seat beside me, and I’d pull the thin blanket up over him so he wouldn’t get cold. The blower in the car’s heater worked just fine; the heater simply refused to produce any significant amount of heat.

I was thinking about me and Lew and about Ma and Pa (both dead now) and how Pa would not approve of our little caper if he was still alive. I was thinking about all this (and what we was about to do *was* bothering me a bit) when I saw the sign twelve miles south of Bradford: FEDERAL CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION. I remembered then; just as we was leaving the area for the city to find work, a new federal prison was being built.

I don’t know what it was that made me want to take a look at

the completed prison. We had time to do it. I'd guess it had something to do with the mission. Lew and me was on. So I turned off the main road and drove a mile or so until I could see the brand new prison complex, its many low-slung buildings sprawled across an open area. I could see the many bright spotlights and yellow lights and the barbed wire and steel razor wire encircling the buildings. The metal from those razors was glinting in those lights like a thousand animal eyes caught in your headlights along the road at night. And I thought of the men inside sitting in their tiny cells, waiting, just waiting. Nothing else they could do but wait. Waiting and pacing in their little cages, or laying back reading magazines, waiting.

Pulling the car over and keeping my foot on the gas to keep things revved up, I fussed a bit more with Lew's blanket. I stared long and hard out through the cold, wet snow, and oddly, I saw warmth inside that prison, too (felt it, actually) and that fleeting sensation scared the hell out of me. More than likely it was warmer inside that prison than it was inside our car or even inside our apartment.

Suddenly I was back to thinking about Pa again. No. Pa would not approve of what me and Lew was about to do. Pa was righteous and God-fearing. Pa could look up at a gloomy sky and see something bright in it, something no one else could see. You're going to have misfortunes, he told me one day a few months before he died. You're going to suffer and go without, you and Lew. And when you think of all your misery, suffering, and misfortunes, think of them as compost: the dirty, rotted garbage life sometimes gives you, the things it seems no one else gets or wants. Then think of what compost does when it's mixed in with soil and around plants. Them plants grow lusher and taller. They bear more fruit. That's what suffering does for us. That's the good that comes out of suffering. That's why you shouldn't avoid it. We become better people, rooted deeper, because of our suffering. Like I tell you, Pa could see bright things where no one else could. Don't weaken to temptation, he told me. Don't take the easy way to avoid suffering. It's a glorious gift from God when we suffer because so much more will grow from it.

I was still staring at the prison, thinking of the men inside who'd taken the easy way and was now doing hard time, and I was thinking how me and Lew had gone so long without, and I was thinking of Pa.

Pa died broke, alone and suffering from that disease that just ate him up, rotted him from the inside out. Pa's compost now, forever compost. It's just I could never see any justice in that, nothing bright, nothing glorious about it at all—in any of it.

I glanced over at Lew, who was stirring awake. If I forgot all Pa tried to teach me, just pushed it aside, I could find all the reasons I needed for doing what I was about to do. The reasons was listed and filed somewhere inside me, and I could flip through them as easily as I used to flip through the file drawers when I worked for Bradford Meats. I could find a reason under *L* for Lew, under *S* for Survival, *F* for Finances and Food. Under *B* for Basics: shelter, security, and warmth. It was easy enough flipping through them and finding them reasons. I never once thought to look under *W* for Wrong.

Still, I was scared over what we was about to do. Scared out of my wits; scared we'd get caught. What would happen to Lew then? And I think that's what made me pull up to the prison. It reminded me where we'd be if we wasn't careful and was caught. I was scared. Like I tell you, I ain't never did anything like this before.

We pulled up in front of the museum around eleven o'clock that night. We was all gassed up and ready to take off once we had the painting. The place was dark, and against the night sky it towered as cold and uninviting as a mausoleum. I took the heavy brick I found and placed it on the gas pedal to keep the car idling, and me and Lew got out. I had to take Lew with me to help boost me over the wall, going in and coming out.

Things began to go wrong almost immediately.

It wasn't so much that large shards of broken glass had been cemented into the top of the wall that was so bad. Those only ripped our clothes, cut us a little, dug into our legs and hands, and hurt like hell when we sat on them full weight preparing to jump down. It was when we dropped to the ground inside the wall that the horror really began.

It came around the corner of the house ablazing, like a crazed dog, waddling as fast as its two webbed feet could carry its heavy body. Its long neck was stuck straight out and bent down a bit in the middle and it was hissing out its throat something fierce, beelining right for us. It was on me before I could move, and about the time it raised its wings to beat me to death, I had no other choice but to reach out and throttle it by the neck to choke off the

honk! I feared was coming out next. It was while I was being beat up by them bony wings, trying to get them under control but never letting loose of the goose's neck, that I glanced over at Lew, who was standing there grinning a Christmas morning grin, clapping his hands gleefully, his eyes wider and brighter than aluminum pie plates. Up till that night, Lew ain't never seen a *live* goose in his life.

I knew then we had an unexpected and unwanted partner. And I remember wishing it had been a pit bull or something that had come at us from around the building instead of a goose.

I couldn't very well kill the thing, not in front of Lew. Neither did I dare let go of the goose, who by this time I'd managed somehow to gather up into a squirming, twisting, kicking bundle of feathers and feet and had him tucked up under my arm. But when I felt something warm and slimy dripping from the goose's rear end and running down my skin, I figured I might be squeezing it a bit too hard.

So I did the only thing I could think to do. I handed the goose to Lew, who took it gingerly at first, and then firmly (and gladly) as I placed his hands where they should go around the bird's body and around the bird's neck. Before we got across the yard to the museum, Lew and that old bird were good buddies—Lew just a-stroking its feathers as best he could; that goose, all settled down now, nuzzling its neck up along Lew's neck; both watching each other with wide-eyed wonder.

It's not often a guy signs *Lew, you stay out here. I'll let you in the front door once I climb those vines to the second story window. Don't make a sound. AND DON'T LET GO OF THAT GOOSE.* But that's what I signed to Lew and then quickly went on about my task.

All the lower windows had security screens on them and so I had no choice but to try climbing a thick bushy vine that ran the entire height of the museum up past the second story windows where I wanted to be. I don't know why a person would want to grow vines that have curved, spiked thorns the size of eagle talons, but that's what that vine had, thorns, talon-sharp thorns, that kept wanting to grab every bit of my exposed flesh and loose clothing they could grab hold of. And once, about halfway up the wall, I felt the entire vine slip down a good six inches and so I climbed faster, got shredded more, trying to get to the second story before the entire growth of thorns, with me wrapped in it, took one long, final plunge onto the icy yard below.

By the time I reached the second story window, my hands was coarse ground beef. I pushed open the double hung window with one hand and I should have guessed it was gonna be spring-loaded, 'cause nothing else had gone right since I pulled up out front, but it *was* spring-loaded and that old heavy window snapped back down on my cold bare fingers, catching me right across my four fingernails.

So now I got throbbing fingers, tears in my eyes from the stinging pain, thorns in my side, and Lew's down below falling in love with that goose. Not exactly my idea of how this caper was supposed to look.

I managed to squirm in through the window and lie resting a moment inside the upstairs hall of the museum. The way things had gone thus far, I was kind of half expecting to find that painting sitting in among a nest of rattlesnakes.

But it wasn't, of course. It was sitting right in the middle of a downstairs room with a bunch of other paintings, all on easels. There was a dim light on somewhere in the room and I could see all the paintings clearly, and I saw by a large, hand-lettered banner on one wall that all the paintings in this particular room was done by students at the local University of Pittsburgh branch campus.

I went over to *Calves in the Barn on a Monday Morn* by Juanita Garcia—Senior; Nursing.

At first I was standing too close to it and couldn't make it out very well, but once I stepped back, I could see the oil painting clearly. It showed the front of a barn with the barn door swung half open. Standing halfway in the door was two very young, possibly newborn calves. The expression in their eyes said more than anything else. Them calves looked bewildered, amazed, lost, entranced, excited, and frightened all at the same time as they peered out at the big new world they was seeing for the first time—all the while staying close to the security of the barn. They seemed to be thinking they'd like to venture outside but was maybe a bit afraid to. Behind the calves in the background inside the barn, a woman's leg was sticking out behind the barn door. It was a bare leg up to mid-thigh, which was as far as the artist let us see. The woman's arms were reaching down and she was either rolling up or rolling down her nylon over the calf of her leg. Nearby, a farmer's straw hat and jeans and coveralls was tossed across an anvil.

Calves in the Barn on a Monday Morn. I repeated it to myself several times. I wasn't gonna be the one to tell Frankie the Finger,

but honestly I kind of liked the painting. It was those damned mixed up, frightened calves looking out that barn door that fascinated me. And I was looking them square in the eye right up to the moment I swiped the painting off the easel and tucked it under my arm.

I sneaked out the front door, found Lew and his goose, and the three of us went out the front gate.

Turns out the gate was never locked, and as I closed it quietly behind us, I saw the dark outline of a fire escape running up the side of the museum leading up to the second floor. I knew then I could have done a better job casing the place.

Back in the city, with the painting leaning up against the wall under Lew's velvet goose, and with Lew chasing that goose around the apartment (I told him he could keep it but he had to clean up after it, and so he trailed behind it all day with a roll of Charmin, wiping up here and there, 'cause that was one loose goose we apprehended), and with little sleep, I was trying to catch some Z's.

Besides what was going on around me in the apartment, I kept thinking about the five G's I'd just earned and how it would take me and Lew a few steps back away from the edge.

I ain't never told no one before, but we lived teetering so close to the edge we was really only an inch away from dropping over, and I always feared one day we'd find ourselves out in the streets pushing shopping carts with the rest of them homeless out there. We was that close. But the five G's Frankie was about to deliver would give us a bit of room, allow us to step back a bit. So thoughts of this money coming in kept me awake, being excited and all about it.

And also keeping me awake was what I saw in the morning paper about our heist. That AP wire must have been singing with the news way ahead of me and Lew driving back south, 'cause on page five of the daily paper next morning, sure enough, there's a picture of old James Conway, owner and curator of the Bradford Fine Arts Museum, frowning and telling the police about the robbery and how the thief got five paintings from throughout the museum. *Five*? That naturally kind of queered my mind 'cause I only stole one painting, and so I was tossing and turning wondering what Vinnie the Vice might be up to. Did he have two or three capers in the works, or was it just coincidence I happened to hit

the museum the exact same night someone else decided to dabble a bit in the fine arts? And what did Vinnie want with *Calves in the Barn on a Monday Morn* anyway?

So I was thinking plenty, tossing and turning and getting no sleep, when I heard the hard, very hard, knock on our door.

Right off, I noticed Frankie the Finger didn't look good. Standing big as a door in front of me, but stooped a bit, there was something unnatural about his puffed lip and how it was split, and there was dried blood encrusted under his nose and his eyes was half closed. He looked sickly pale, like he'd had all the *red* blood drained out of him and all that was left inside him was white corpuscles. But what was really unnatural was, when I opened the door, Frankie fell forward flat on his face, not even putting his hands out to stop himself. 'Course he couldn't very well put his hands out 'cause they was tied behind his back with a good stout rope. When he landed on his face, a fresh spurt of blood began to gush from his nose and mouth.

That's when I noticed the other man standing right behind Frankie. He was thin and short with thick black hair and with skin the color of coffee if you pour a bit too much cream in it. And it took me only a short, quick breath to realize who it was—Carlos El Mako Hernandez.

El Mako, such as in Mako shark (which will give you some idea about this guy's temperament), headed the other family I was telling you about earlier. These families, always feuding, was like two great trees trying to grow in the same plot of earth, and at that moment I'm afraid Frankie, lying sickly pale on my floor, looked very uprooted.

El Mako tiptoed over Frankie like he was tiptoeing through garbage and didn't want to get his ostrichskin boots soiled.

Frankie groaned, and El Mako suddenly lashed out sharklike, vicious and unprovoked, spinning around and giving Frankie a sharp kick solid in the throat with the pointed toe of his boot. Frankie gurgled, the way Lew does sometimes, only Lew don't spit out blood bubbles.

A younger Hispanic man followed El Mako in; the muzzle of an Uzi sticking out a bit beneath his jacket. Uzi took a stand right against our wall where he could easily spray the entire room with one quick burst of his weapon.

Simultaneously whistling sharply between his teeth while crisply snapping his fingers, El Mako signaled two more fellows

who suddenly appeared from out in the hall. Wordlessly, each man grabbed one of Frankie's feet, and the last I ever saw of Frankie the Finger at my place was him being pulled out into the hall on his face, his blood leaving a slimy, wormy trail along the floor where he was dragged.

"Niños," El Mako said, studying me and Lew with a genuine puzzled look. "Niños." He sounded astounded when he repeated that in his eyes we was children.

He was standing near *Calves in the Barn on a Monday Morn.* Sweeping his thin hand across the front of the painting he asked, "You bought this, señor? You have very good taste."

I shook my head, no, I didn't buy it. I still had no idea why he was in my apartment, and I was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable in my guts 'cause I had a quaint feeling our five G's just got drug out my front door. But I wasn't about to tell El Mako I lifted the painting. I wasn't about to tell him I was working for Vinnie the Vice, either. Mental pictures of Frankie's most recent exit convinced me *that* might be unwise.

"Then someone gave it to you as a gift. The artist, perhaps." El Mako's dark, beady eyes never blinked, and he was clearly expecting an answer. I mean, it wasn't just a passing question, and I began to equate the painting with El Mako's presence. But again I shook my head slowly, that no one had actually given me the painting. Uzi stirred against the wall, and I shot a quick, nervous glance in his direction.

"You did not buy the painting," El Mako went on. "No one presented it to you as a gift. So, señor, what is it doing here? Do you even know who the artist of this magnificent oil painting is, señor?"

"It's signed on there Juanita Garcia." My mouth was dry. It was becoming increasingly clear the painting we lifted was the reason El Mako was our guest. I quickly equated Garcia with Hernandez, both Hispanic names, and I started feeling sick all over. And remembering how Frankie gave us leave, my stomach just got tighter and tighter. I could feel the skin on my face cool quickly. I began hoping maybe Vinnie the Vice would come busting through the door at any moment, saving Lew and me.

"Juanita Garcia. Yes. A lovely woman. Studying to be a nurse. I think sometimes she is ashamed of her family. She is young, though, idealistic but very talented. No, señor? This painting, does it not speak of innocence and fear? Look, the faces of those small calves. Does the painting not speak of freshness and newness, too:

newborn calves; morn, a new day; Monday, a new week? Does it not ask questions, señor? Who is the girl? Is she taking her nylons off or pulling them on? Where is the farmer? Was there innocence and fear in their lovemaking, señor? There is much talent here. The painting is life: a simple thing made complex by the many questions it asks." It seemed El Mako was talking to no one in particular, just lecturing like an art teacher but gliding sharklike around the room, his eyes seeking every corner, scanning every piece of our furniture.

"She does not know that her education and her future have already been taken care of for her. Juanita Garcia should just paint. Why go to college? And why hide who she is? Why can she not use her full name: Juanita Garcia Hernandez? This would make her papa so very happy. She is very talented." El Mako stopped pacing and lifted his eyes, and they tore a jagged hole right through me. "Juanita Garcia. She is my daughter, señor, my flesh and blood. You would think she would be proud to announce she is a Hernandez. I have paid for everything in her life, so I suppose I could say this is *my* painting, too. Señor, how can the people see *my* magnificent painting on display when you have it hidden here in your home hundreds of miles away?"

I swallowed hard, my throat as sore as I imagined Frankie's must have been. Suddenly our normally cool apartment was becoming unbearably hot.

"Come. Let me show you something." El Mako glided towards me, took my arm, and gently led me to the window. He pulled back the drapes. "Watch there," he said, pointing at the ten story building directly across the street.

Even through the dim light of dusk, I could see two men throw a bundle of rope out the tenth story window. One end of the rope was tied to something inside the room. The other end was tied around a man's neck. The man was seated on the windowsill. Dressed in a London Fog overcoat, he was wearing a hood over his head, his hands tied behind him. He swayed on the ledge like he was groggy and wasn't aware of what was going on. I didn't have to be told the rope dangling down the front of the building was only nine stories long. Not that that made a difference. Someone gave the hooded man a little shove out the window, and he fell like a rock. When he reached the end of the rope, he recoiled, but it wasn't a recoil full of buoyancy and bounce. He recoiled more like Lew's yo-yo does when on the downstroke the string gets snagged.

on the spool. It was more or less a solid, dead-weight bounce, not a very high bounce.

El Mako watched me watch the body swing back and forth slowly, like a pendulum on a clock starting to keep time in eternity. "I sometimes do not speak English so good, señor," El Mako said slowly. "Sometimes it is difficult for people to understand my messages, but even *you* understand *that*. No?" He pointed back outside. "*Comprende, señor?*"

I "comprendayed." I also felt myself grasping at a thin thread of hope that Vinnie the Vice might still arrive, especially now with his right-hand man hanging around outside. Vinnie had a reputation for taking care of his own. He was not to be taken lightly. He would not take the hanging lightly. I guess I still held a hope I'd get my five G's, maybe a bonus for putting up with all this. But I had to give Vinnie time. And for Lew's sake, I was hoping there wasn't gonna be no shootout right in my apartment. "Vinnie ain't gonna like that," I told El Mako, trying to muster as much confidence as I could, pointing out the window at the body.

"No. I do not suppose that he will." He folded his arms across his chest. "Señor Vinnie would like to embarrass me. He would have liked to, oh, maybe smear my Juanita's painting maybe with some pasta sauce. Who knows? By having you steal this painting, he would like to tell me he can get to my Juanita any time he wants, and so therefore he could get to me. I must answer him, señor. I must. And there is my answer. Can you understand my message?" He indicated the body which by this time had stopped swinging. "*Comprende?*"

"I understand," I told him. "But Vinnie the Vice will not like your answer. Frankie the Finger was his—"

El Mako tipped his head back and laughed. "Señor, I see you are confused. I see I have not made myself clear. You think that is Señor Frankie outside? That is not Señor Frankie out there, but you must think that. No? No, señor. Right now Señor Frankie is on his way to my little cabana in Florida. He'll be working for me for ah, well, only a few moments. He will be feeding my alligators. They must be fed, too, you know."

El Mako's face was so close to mine I could feel the heat of his breath coming out his nostrils and flaring across my cheek. "Señor," he hissed, "that ees Señor Vinnie you see out there, how you say in English, at the end of his rope."

Suddenly I felt real sick, the worst I felt since I got into this.

Carlos El Mako Hernandez spun me around suddenly and viciously, the blue vein along his neck swelled like an overheated radiator hose. "You are children, señor. You and he." He pointed at Lew, who was cowering into the corner of the couch clutching tight to his goose. "You are small fish swimming and playing with the sharks. For this reason only I will give you another chance. You are nothing to me but small fish."

I could feel my blood draining from my head, flooding my shoes. El Mako was right about one thing. Lew and me was in deep over our heads, drowning in the middle of the family feud.

"I want you to put the painting back, señor. Tonight."

He strode briskly towards Lew, and I just somehow knew he was gonna make a demonstration and kill Lew's goose. El Mako was already drawing out a long knife. Lew was cringing, and the goose let out a long hiss, trying to break free of Lew's grasp.

"No," I yelled sharply, surprising even me. "We'll put it back." I'd heard sometimes if you smack an attacking shark across the snout it will turn.

Lew drew the goose in closer, sensing what was happening, perhaps remembering what Frankie did to his ceramic goose.

El Mako stopped, stiffened, and then turned towards me slowly. "It is good you want to protect your flesh and blood," he said. "That is very good, señor. And that is all I am doing." The knife disappeared somewhere inside his jacket. "Tonight, señor," he hissed again. "Put the painting back tonight."

In a moment, both El Mako and Uzi vanished out the front door, El Mako frantically flailing his arms, jabbering something wildly in Spanish about *niños, niños* as he left.

We was followed the entire trip back up north. El Mako went to great lengths to make sure we knew we was being followed. Every time we stopped for gas (Lew worked the gas pedal to keep us running), El Mako had Uzi pull right in behind us at the pump, his big, new stretch gleaming shiny white under the bright gas station lights.

I didn't care much we was followed. I was gonna do exactly what El Mako wanted us to do. I was gonna drop that painting back at the art museum, and then me and Lew was gonna keep traveling north up into Buffalo and try to get out from under all this. I was gonna get hold of a friend of mine who worked for Sahlen Meats in Buffalo (I used to pick up meats there for Bradford Meat. Sahlen

makes a great hot dog.), and I was gonna get me an honest job, get back into the honest life, and me and Lew was gonna eat good and live honest 'cause I wasn't ever gonna even *think* of venturing out into anything illegal again, ever.

At least that's what I was thinking, driving up with Lew sitting next to me cradling his goose. 'Course, how it actually turned out was another matter. There was a few more surprises waiting for us.

At four in the morning it was still plenty dark on the street in front of the museum when we pulled up. The street was plenty deserted, too, except for my car and El Mako's stretch parked a long block behind us, idling softly, waiting.

I put the brick on the gas pedal and revved the car a bit. The way the starter ground when we got going I knew it had no more starts left in it, so I had to keep the car running just one more time. Then I planned to dump it in Buffalo.

Me with my painting and Lew with his goose got out and went through the front gate. I signed to Lew to let the goose go, that it was back home now and we couldn't take it with us to Buffalo. But Lew just shook his head no, and I could tell he was starting to be childish stubborn about it, and by this time frankly I was in no mood and my hands was too tired to argue with him, so I let him keep hold of it.

Up the fire escape we climbed, being careful not to tear the painting's canvas; being careful not to let the window slam back down on me, Lew, and the goose; being careful not to make much noise.

In the room downstairs I found the empty easel still standing there in the dim light. I set the painting down on the easel and stepped back, glad to be rid of the cursed thing. I was taking one last long study into the eyes of them frightened calves when someone coughed behind me. I was about to shush Lew when I realized Lew was standing next to me on my left. I turned slowly and found myself staring right down the barrel of a .45 pistol being held by one James Conway, museum curator.

What else could I do but just sigh, exasperated, letting all the air and frustration out of me until I could feel myself go completely limp, like I had nothing left in me. And I didn't, either. After all we'd been through, we was caught anyway—*returning* the painting of all things.

Conway spoke first. "May I ask what you two are up to? Rather,

I should say, you three." He tipped his head towards the goose.

"We're returning your painting," I told him. I didn't feel no fear; I didn't feel nothing. This entire caper had more twists in it than a corkscrew, and nothing surprised me any more. "I'm sorry it got stolen," I apologized to Conway, wording it so that I wasn't exactly confessing to the crime. "See. I put it back for you."

Conway kept the .45 leveled at me in a way I sensed he knew how to use it. "I see," he said, frowning.

"Are you going to call the police?" I had to ask that so I'd know if I had to try to knock the gun from his hands and make a run for it or not. No way was I going to jail.

He was a tall and twig-slender man, and standing in front of me holding that gun with both hands out in front of his body, he kind of reminded me of a praying mantis.

"No," Conway said. "No, I'm not going to call the police."

I breathed a sigh of relief and made a slight move towards the front door. "Then we'll be going and—"

But Conway had other ideas. He stepped in front of me to block my exit and said calmly, "Take that painting with you when you leave."

I said, "What?," honestly astounded. I could feel my heart sink to all-time new lows, and I could hear Lew gurgling a bit behind me like things was getting twisted up in his mind the way his fingers do. Even Lew could surmise the position we was in: El Mako and Uzi outside wanting us to return the painting; now this guy with a .45 on us inside telling us to get it out of there. My own mind was beginning to feel a bit twisted.

"I said get that painting out of here. I don't want it. What'd you bring it back for?" Conway whispered in a hoarse, low voice.

"It's yours," I told him. "I brought it back because it was yours and it was stolen. I read about it in the paper. It must be worth some money so—"

"It's worth more to me stolen than returned." Conway did not lower the gun. "I've turned it in to insurance already. Adjusted its value a bit, mind you, and added four more paintings of considerably greater value that I burned out back, so I don't need this one showing up."

An insurance ripoff. What a time and place for this, I thought.

"Them crooked, damned politicians in Washington," Conway said, as if he suddenly needed to confess and felt he might be telling someone who understood. He certainly didn't look the criminal

type and probably had never done anything illegal in his life. "They can cheat and steal taxpayers' money through their own crooked dealings, savings and loans, junkets, and then when the country's broke, what do these crooks in Washington do? I'll tell you what they do." His voice was winding into a higher gear and pitch, like a train picking up speed. "What do they do to pick up the money they steal from us? They cut funds for things like fine arts programs, things like my museum here. Can't afford it, they tell us. We're out of money, they tell us. Tighten belts. We'll talk about it when we get back from our tax-financed trips around the world, they say. Without money soon, I'm forced to close and we all suffer. So get that painting out of here, before you screw the whole thing up. *Now!*" Even in the dim light I could see Conway's face was ruby red with anger. "*Get it out of here. Understand?*"

I understood. Thus far I was made to understand things in three languages.

When he pulled the hammer of the pistol back, me and Lew snatched the painting and was out of there. Suddenly I was getting the feeling I wasn't ever gonna get rid of that old painting. It kept wanting to stick to me worse than if that oil painting had been drawn on flypaper.

Before we got across the museum yard to the car, I had already made up my mind what we had to do. There was no other recourse. I signed the plan to Lew.

Waiting for the right moment, when an early morning sanitation truck pulled right smack in front of El Mako's stretch, thereby partially obscuring his view but totally blocking his stretch from pulling out quick, me and Lew (with the painting and the goose) made a dash for our car.

All I wanted was a head start towards downtown Bradford. I knew I'd never outrun that stretch, but if I could get downtown where there would be a bit more activity, I felt I could save me and Lew from Uzi and El Mako, but it was Uzi I was suddenly more concerned about. He was the trigger.

And it worked. I was already three or four blocks ahead, my car sputtering and spurting, when I watched in the rear view mirror as El Mako's stretch suddenly veered sharply around the sanitation truck and lurched forward full speed in hot pursuit.

By the time I pulled up alongside the jewelry store on Bradford's Main Street, the stretch was beginning to bear down on us. I grabbed the brick we'd been using, hopped out of the car (which

immediately coughed and spit and then died), and I heaved the brick accurately through the jewelry store window, hitting it dead center.

Before I could say, "Take me, I'm yours," Bradford's finest was all over us, surrounding me, pushing me, cuffing me, taking me and Lew into the security of police custody.

The last I ever saw of El Mako and Uzi was that white stretch suddenly slowing, and then, using its turn signals properly, it made a right-hand turn off Main Street and headed south out of town.

I spent the night inside with the Bradford city police confessing to everything from top to bottom, feeling safe.

All this happened six months and a short trial ago. It's spring now in the mountains. From where I'm standing, I can sometimes see deer across the clearing pawing through the snow rooting for fresh spring shoots, and sometimes I see flocks of turkeys gathering, getting ready to mate up, and rabbits playing in the grassy areas, and I even saw a coyote sneaking across the opening once.

'Course at night, because of the bright spotlights and them yellow outside lights glinting off the rolls of razor wire, I can't see much then. There's just a wall of black out there.

I got plenty of time to think things out. Actually I got one to five for B&E. But it *is* warm in here, and I get three squares. The pay's not so great, about eleven cents an hour, but honestly, I got more inside than I had outside. Don't get me wrong. I can't say I like being here, but like I tell you, it gives me time to think things through.

Where's Lew and everyone else?

Mercifully, the court went easy on Lew, particularly when I told them he was with me because he is like he is and had no choice. That was part of the deal I cut with the D.A. Lew wasn't to do time. He's in a home near Harrisburg waiting for me to get out, and then we'll pick up where we left off and continue our trip up into Buffalo. I get a letter from Lew every week. He's even got that goose with him. The home's kind of adopted the bird as a mascot. Someone gave it a name, "Silly." I thought that was kind of funny.

'Course no one ever heard from Frankie the Finger. Alligators don't talk much. You know where Vinnie the Vice is at. They found El Mako in the wharf section of the city, a 9 mm bullet parked in

his temple. 'Course everyone who is in the know knows that was the work of Vinnie the Vice's oldest son, Louie the Luger. And Conway? I was a bit surprised about Conway. It seems when they was gathering evidence for his insurance fraud charges they discovered James Conway had forgotten to pay a goodly portion of his federal income taxes to Uncle. Conway, as I've heard through the prison's wireless communication system that somehow links all the prisons across the country together, Conway's doing time in Allenwood, the country club of federal prisons. And speaking of doing time in Allenwood, all those crooked politicians Conway was so mad at, well, they aren't doing any time at all, even though they are probably just as guilty as the rest of us. The guys in here figure they'll all be reelected, pushing for new, tougher anticrime laws. Funny, ain't it, when you think of it.

But sometimes at night when the winds of everything die down, when the guys are asleep and it's still and quiet in the prison and in my mind, when I can't sleep and I can't make no more excuses to myself for what I've done, it's then he visits me.

He's like a kind, loving spirit that soothes me during my weakest moments, when I can no longer fool myself, when I'm overwhelmed with depression thinking, *I don't belong in here*, and I want out so bad I'm near tears and suffering and hurting.

It's during these moments I think of him most and hear the things he used to tell me clearly, and I find myself thinking things in a way I ain't never thought before, deep and fertile thoughts: *You was right, Pa. You was right.*

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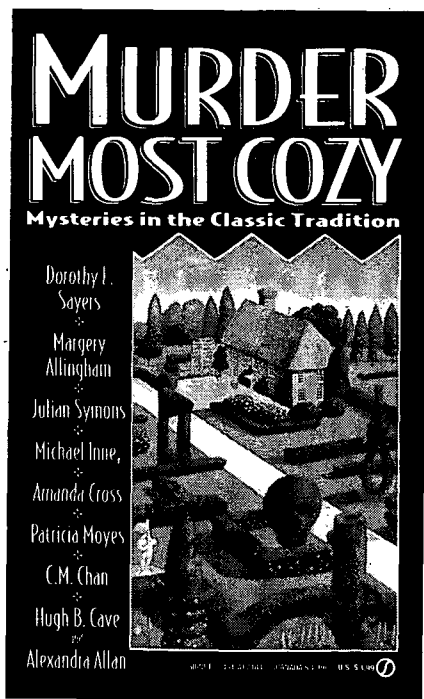
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FICTION



A Minor Mystery

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When the call came, Richie Palakos was in his cruiser in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen, finishing his nightly ice cream cone and hoping that the second half of his shift would be as uneventful as the first. He flicked on the overheads and took off, knowing Seybold would be timing him. Driving with one hand until the cone was gone, he arrived at the scene before the emergency wagon and checked in. Let Seybold find fault with that.

In his headlights, two men stood on the sidewalk in the soft darkness of the trees along the curb, the row of well-spaced, huge stone Colonials behind them fronted by fifty feet of lawn. The taller was white-haired and built well enough to have modeled the shortsleeved shirt and walking shorts, holding the leash of the golden retriever at his side loosely in one hand. Dressed the same way but dogless, the shorter man was a living argument for a fitness crusade.

The tall one waved with his free hand. "Over there."

The beam of Richie's big torch picked out the figure sprawled halfway up the lawn. In this suburban neighborhood, a crumpled body was a novelty.

"What happened?"

"No idea." The shorter man

nodded at the other. "His dog found him. He rang my bell. I called you."

Richie crossed the thick grass, white lawn moths fluttering in the light. The man was young, sprawled on his back as though he'd run into the azalea and been thrown back. The flashlight's beam bathed an ugly purple bruise surrounding a long red gash on the man's temple, held together by a dozen stitches. Below a sweat- and grass-stained T-shirt, baggy green cotton pants, held at the waist by a drawstring, ended six inches above bare, dirty, and bloody feet.

"You don't know him?"

"I've never seen him in my life."

The emergency wagon felt its way down the street, red lights flashing. One of the paramedics left it before it was really stopped, his case in his hand. Cobb. One of the best, murmuring, "What do we have, Richie?"

"Looks like an upwardly mobile druggie."

Cobb pulled back the man's eyelid, felt his pulse, and listened to his heart. "Nah, I don't think so. Let's move him. Fast."

Only a few spectators gathered. This neighborhood wasn't high-density housing, and those who weren't walled up in air-conditioned homes were

probably at the shore for the summer.

As they wheeled the gurney to the wagon, Richie held high the IV that Cobb had inserted. No matter what was wrong with you, finding a vein and feeding something into your bloodstream seemed mandatory. "Notice his head and what he's wearing, Richie?" asked Cobb. "I don't know where he got the T-shirt, but the pants are OR greens. That cut was stitched by an expert, and the dressing has been torn off. Had to have been in a hospital, and he's sure as hell in no condition to have checked himself out." He grunted as they slid the gurney through the door. "You'd better see if one of them lost a patient."

Richie swung the doors closed, turned to the two men, and reached for his notebook. Names, date, time, statements. The backbone of police work.

Ten minutes later the tall man and the dog continued their walk.

"You called him judge," said the householder.

"President Judge Clement of county court," said Richie.

"You're kidding. That estate of his is a mile away."

"Maybe he just likes to walk around what used to be his. This area was once part of the Clement farm."

"So I've heard. Bought it from the Leni-Lenape for beads and sold it for diamonds."

Richie slid into the cruiser. "They earned it by getting here before anyone else. But he's the last. When he goes, the name will appear only on Clement Boulevard and in the history books."

He glanced into the mirror as he drove off. The householder was studying his house. An electrician would get a call in the morning to install a few lights. If you couldn't see a man lying on the lawn, you sure as hell couldn't see a break-in artist working on a window.

He drove by the broad marble steps of St. Cecelia's where he'd been married. This neighborhood hadn't existed when he was eight and played touch football where that house now stood, the spectators a small herd of Clement Guernseys. He and his friends had also splashed in a small stream—now concealed in a conduit running beneath the streets and lawns—and occasionally had sneaked through the woods along the stream to peek at the long, low, white Clement house, built before the First Continental Congress met. Tucked among the trees, it had a broad verandah overlooking a trimmed lawn that sloped to a duck pond created by a low

stone dam—the pond and ducks a source of wonder to town-house kids with back yards that could be crossed with a hop, skip, and jump.

When the judge was gone, the house would probably be replaced by a shopping center.

In the emergency room, he found Cobb filling out his forms, Mavis Brevard, the grayhaired admitting nurse, looking over his shoulder.

"Where's the patient?"

"X-ray," said Cobb. "What I thought. Not drugged out. That whack on the head. At least a severe concussion. No I.D. on those pants, but he must have been in a hospital. Not this one. Did you check yet?"

"Not over the air. Too many scanners tuned in." He smiled at Mavis as he reached for the phone.

"Use the pay phone," said Mavis. "We need that line open."

"Let him alone," said Cobb. "It's a slow night. Besides, as a good customer, he's entitled because of all the business he and his wife have given maternity."

"Huh," she said, "it's been two years since his last one. Given up, Richie?"

"No, but my wife has."

"I don't blame her. Five is enough."

He dialed Seybold, told him where he was, and asked, "Anything there about a hospital missing a patient?"

"Hold it." Richie heard papers rustling.

"Rolling Hills," said Seybold. "Early this morning. If that's him, how'd he get here?"

"We'll ask him when we can. Hold on." He relayed the information to Cobb as a white-coated doctor joined him. His hair was straight and black, his face smooth, his eyes slanted. Because he was getting older they seemed younger each year, thought Richie, but Larry Wu was ridiculous. He looked like he belonged in the high school up the road.

"Rolling Hills?" Larry shook his head. "That would explain his bloody feet, but it's hard to believe. Rolling Hills is what—twenty, twenty-five miles away? I'd have bet the guy couldn't get farther than a hundred yards."

Richie handed him the phone. "Tell Seybold to read the description."

The resident frowned as he listened. "That's him," he told Seybold. "Who do I contact?" He broke the connection, said, "I still don't believe it," and began dialing.

"How's he doing?" asked Richie.

"The head experts have him

upstairs. You don't take a twenty-five mile hike after suffering a concussion like that, even if you're wearing shoes. I hope he didn't kill himself."

"That was Judge Clement found him, wasn't it?" asked Cobb.

"Walking his dog. He didn't notice anything. The dog did."

"If the guy survives, he ought to buy that dog a big steak."

Larry covered the mouthpiece. "Seybold's last words were, tell Richie to get his rear end out on the street. Why is he always after you, Richie?"

"Hates his guts," said Cobb cheerfully. "Everyone knows his job should have gone to Richie, so he's always trying to make him look bad."

"The guy was mumbling when we put him in the wagon, Cobb," said Richie. "Anything that made sense?"

Scratching out an error, Cobb cursed, the four letter word bringing a glare from Mavis. "Not to me. Sounded like 'house with gold windows,' whatever that means."

Larry hung up. "They're faxing over what they have on him. Name is Kevin Klinger. About twenty-four hours ago, his car was creased by a van on I-95. The city cops took him to Rolling Hills. How the hell he got out of there no one knows. Nurse looked in on him, he was

there. Next visit he was gone. So she says. Whoever she is, she's in trouble. They'd notified his mother in Evansburg. She arrived this morning. Must have been very embarrassing to tell her sorry, your son has disappeared. I wonder if she knows a good lawyer."

"Good or bad, one will find her," said Cobb.

"She's on her way here. Incidentally, Cobb, your hearing is okay. I heard him mumble something like 'house with gold windows,' too."

The sliding doors snarled open to admit a sagging, gray-faced man holding a hand wrapped in a blood-saturated towel and being supported by a white-faced friend, wiping Richie from the minds of everyone in the ER.

He walked out. His part of the job was done. Seybold would tell him to write it up and forget it. Just another public service rendered.

Why in the hell had Klinger stumbled clear across the city? Where did he think he was going? And house with gold windows? Addled by that concussion, he could have been talking about anything. Anything. Seybold would say it was none of his business, but Seybold had the imagination and curiosity of a block of granite. And the intelligence.

Two domestic disturbances and a minor traffic accident kept him from getting back until the end of his shift. He told the dispatcher where he'd be. Seybold would be unhappy when he heard.

Larry Wu finished bandaging the head of a drunk who had fallen outside a bar, turned him over to a grim-faced wife whose supportiveness and understanding had probably been exhausted long ago, and said, "I knew you'd be back. They had to operate. What makes it bad was Rolling Hills needed him there under observation so that they could jump right in if a hematoma or an embolus from internal bleeding showed up. Nasty things that could cause a lot of damage or kill him. The bleeding was there. We got him at least sixteen hours later. Hard to tell how much damage was done until he comes out of it, but if he hadn't been found when he was—"

"Wonder what made him take off?"

"Hell, Richie, a smack on the head is like kicking a computer. You get all sorts of short circuits. He had no idea what he was doing."

"Scrambled or not, his brain was sending a message. Mother get here?"

"In the waiting room upstairs. She was up at five this morning for a two-hour drive to Rolling Hills, found he'd disappeared, hung around until he turned up, and then drove here. She's running on reserve, and if she doesn't get some rest, she'll be in a bed, too. I told her there was nothing she could do here and she should check into a motel, but she wouldn't listen. Maybe she's afraid he'll disappear again. Why don't you see what a silver-tongued Greek can do?"

In the intensive care unit, the screens of the monitoring equipment showed that everything physical was normal. The marvelous electronics couldn't reach deep into the recesses of the brain to show the pain and the fear and the weariness, and the images of rectangular windows glowing against darkness promising warmth and love from a mother who would make him safe and whole again.

The thought struck Richie the moment he saw her. The figure on the lawn had to be in his mid-twenties. Mrs. Klinger was well into her sixties. Kevin must have made it just before menopause, but then maybe menopause was on his mind because Francie had been telling him of the difficulties her oldest

sister had been having in spite of the medication.

Then again, she might not be as old as she looked. That day would have etched the lines in her face deeper. Stretched as tight as a washline on a windy day, Francie would say.

She sat erect, hands in her lap, a woman with tightly curled gray hair dressed in a blue silk print. Pretty once; pleasing now, her body spare and hard, the clasped hands liver-spotted and rough. She took in the uniform with a trace of worry in her eyes.

"Kevin did something wrong?"

"Not at all." Richie explained who he was. "I simply wanted to know how he was doing."

The head bobbed. "Thank you for your interest."

"He's your youngest?"

Her eyes shifted. "He's the only one."

Which explained a great deal.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee? Something to eat?"

Her voice was soft. "No. You're very kind." She rose, folded her arms, and looked out the window at the traffic passing on the road below.

"You spoke to him?" she asked.

"He couldn't speak to anyone. All he did was mumble about a house with gold win-

dows. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Gold windows?" She shook her head.

"Has Kevin been in the city before?"

He saw no movement, yet he felt she'd stiffened.

"No. He lived on our farm until he went to the university. Penn State. Then he worked in Pittsburgh before he was transferred here."

"Mr. Klinger didn't come with you?"

"My husband died six years ago. If Hans had lived, we'd have kept the farm... Kevin wanted to... but college was better for him. He's no farmer, not like Hans. I sold it and moved to Evansburg." She looked at him and smiled. "Life became much easier for me, of course."

"I have to leave, but please don't worry. I'm sure he'll be fine."

He stopped long enough to tell Larry that even the smoothest talking, motivational oriented, inspirational orator in the universe couldn't get her to leave until she spoke to her son and was certain he was all right.

Seybold caught up with him in the locker room.

"What's your big interest in that guy in the hospital?"

Richie shrugged. He couldn't

explain something that he didn't understand himself.

"I don't know why, with all the years you have in, you haven't learned what's our business and what's not," said Seybold.

A peerless leader, Seybold. Living proof it paid to have a brother as a commissioner when promotion time rolled around.

The five children had taken their toll, but aside from the stockiness, Francie had lost nothing through the years. She was still pretty, neat, efficient, good humored, and smarter than he was. Elbow on the table and hand propping up her chin, she watched him finish the midnight snack.

"You made the scanner a half dozen times tonight. Anything interesting?"

He told her about Kevin Klinger.

"Larry Wu said he had no idea where he was going, but if that was so, wouldn't he have simply wandered around? If you look at the time—what I mean is he left Rolling Hills before six. We found him about nine. Say sixteen hours. Almost anyone can walk at three miles an hour, but he's hurt and in his bare feet. Say he stumbled along at two miles an

hour, stopping to rest now and then. Rolling Hills is twenty miles away as the crow flies. Doesn't bother anyone else, but see what I mean?"

She cleared away his plate and refilled his coffee cup. "He had to go almost directly from there to here."

"Why? His mother said he's never been here before. He grew up on a farm near Evansburg, went to Penn State, worked in Pittsburgh, was transferred here. So where was he going?"

"He must have passed hundreds of people. You'd think that at least one would have helped."

"He'd look like another homeless person or mental case on the loose and they didn't want to get involved. The point is—his head had to feel as though it would explode, Lord knows how many times he fell, but he kept going until he couldn't take another step. Why?"

"What did his mother have to say?"

"Nothing much. Nice woman. Incidentally, he's an only child, and she's old enough for him to be a change of life baby."

"He could be adopted, you know."

"I never thought of that."

"You should have. If that

clock was ticking on me and you hadn't kept me well supplied—"

He grinned. "Sure five is enough?"

"When two-year-old Petey makes me a grandmother, I'll still be young enough to enjoy it. Time for bed. You're testifying in court tomorrow."

He looked in on the sleeping kids. When Larry Wu had children of his own, he'd understand why Mrs. Klinger wouldn't leave. Couldn't leave.

The lines on the monitors still indicated normal brain activity, but those minute electrical impulses couldn't show what that activity was. The pain was deep enough to bring tears. One place and one place only where that pain could be eased. He had to get to the house with gold windows.

Richie called the hospital in the morning before he left for the county courthouse. They gave him Larry Wu.

"What are you still doing there?"

"Residents are unique individuals who require no rest or sleep. That's why we become great doctors. If you're calling about your salvage job, he's holding his own in intensive care."

"Mother still there?"

"I thought mine was the epitome of maternal devotion until she came along. Still wondering about the house with gold windows?"

"He must have had a destination."

"Sure, but it could exist only in his head. Head traumas sometimes have strange results. Amnesia. Some experience a heightened sense of smell or taste. Some have even acquired ESP. Who knows? Maybe he caught a glimpse of the future in the home improvement field. We've gone through aluminum storm windows, aluminum siding, steel doors, replacement windows, and Lord knows what else. Gold windows might be next. Forget it, Richie. You ain't never going to know."

Richie was in the courtroom for only a half hour, the trial canceled because of a last-minute plea bargain. Leaving by the rear door, he ran into Judge Clement. The man walking the dog last evening could have been any one of dozens he drove by while on duty. This one was not. The expensive gray suit was perfectly fitted, the white shirt crisp, the blue tie precisely knotted.

The judge nodded. "Officer Palakos. How did our young man make out?"

"That head injury was from an automobile accident. They operated last night. Subdural bleeding. Lucky you found him when you did."

Clement waved. "Not me. The dog. I didn't notice him at all."

He didn't ask who the man was or why he'd been wandering around. Perhaps because he considered it no longer relevant, thought Richie. He'd done his part and it was over. Onward and upward. Like Seybold.

He turned to watch people step aside as Clement passed. More than his title made them move. More than his appearance. It was his manner, the way he held himself. Make Richie Palakos president judge and dress him the same way and he'd still come across as what he was—a slightly overweight guy no one would defer to, but then he didn't have generations of wealth and fine schooling behind him. The Palakoses had a long way to go.

In addition to being president judge, Clement also ran the party that had controlled the county for more than a hundred years. Fair and honest, the newspapers called him, unusual words for a politician. Could be because he had nothing to gain, thought Richie. He already had more money than

he could use and no one to leave it to.

He found Mrs. Klinger still in the waiting room. If she'd catnapped during the night, it didn't show. The lines in her face were deeper. The man in the brown suit with her was stocky, hair thinning above a square face.

She smiled at Richie and introduced him.

"Kevin worked for Mr. Vernon," she said.

The man extended his hand. "I'm his district sales manager."

Vernon was solid, big through the shoulders. His grip showed it wasn't fat. The warmth in the voice and the grip made Richie feel that Vernon was happy to meet him. Whether it was genuine or part of his stock in trade, Richie couldn't tell. A good salesman never stopped selling himself.

A smiling nurse padded into the room. "Mrs. Klinger? He's awake and in fine shape. You can see him for a few minutes now."

She closed her eyes and swayed. Vernon wrapped a big arm around her shoulders. She opened tear-brightened eyes and smiled, shedding ten years and lighting the room.

"Go." Vernon turned her over to the nurse.

He grinned at Richie. "Is

there a cafeteria in this place? I've had enough of that machine mud they call coffee to last a lifetime."

Stirring three sugars into his cup, Vernon told him Kevin had been with the company less than four years, had started in Pittsburgh and moved to Philadelphia and was destined for corporate headquarters in New York.

"The doctor explained he might have temporary amnesia, so I'm as happy as she is. That kid—" He shook his head. "Nothing wrong with my two, but he's one in a million."

"Good salesman?"

"More. He'll probably jump over me, and I'll be reporting to him in a few years."

"No concern that he might take your job?"

Vernon spread his hands and smiled. "I'm a good salesman and that's a very transferable skill. The principles are the same in any field. Besides, placing Kevin in my job would be a waste of talent. I'm only too happy to see him move up. Look—if you have any sense at all, sooner or later you realize your limitations. Hell, I'd rather be in a job I do well than in one where I sweat each day through. My ego isn't so big that I refuse to recognize that some men have more on the ball than I do."

And moving him up would really remove the threat to your job, thought Richie. I've been around the block a time or two myself, Vernon.

"Any idea of what might make him take off like that?"

"Not a clue. Amazing that he could cover that distance as injured as he was, but I'll say this—I'm not surprised. If anyone could do it, he could."

"He mumbled something about gold windows. Mean anything?"

"Not to me. Perhaps to his mother."

"She doesn't know either."

"Then I'd have to say no one except Kevin does. She's very devoted to him, which is sometimes more characteristic of an adoptive parent than a natural one."

Francie had been right again. Richie rose. "We'd better get back."

They found her holding the hand of the figure on the bed, cleaned up now and with the inevitable tubes connected to various parts of his anatomy. The company making that tubing must have a bottom line that would make a stockbroker weep for joy.

Seeing him clearly for the first time, Richie had to agree Vernon had been right. Big, goodlooking kid. Attention getter.

The voice was a whisper, but the eyes were bright and aware. If there had been any brain damage, it wasn't apparent yet. Some people were born lucky.

Kevin motioned him closer. Evidently they'd explained where he was and how he got there. "Who found me?"

"A man walking his dog."

"Thank him for me."

"I'll see if he can stop by so that you can do that yourself."

He stepped back, wanting to ask what in the hell the house with gold windows meant. Wrong time. Vernon was assuring the figure on the bed that the people in the office were looking forward to having him back when he was ready.

Vernon turned to Mrs. Klinger.

"Now that you know he's all right, you really should get some rest."

"I know the manager of a motel a short distance away," said Richie. "I'm sure I can get Mrs. Klinger a special rate."

She protested politely, but "special rate" was intriguing for someone facing more than a one night stay.

She followed him to the motel, and Richie escorted her to her room. She'd fall asleep the moment the door closed behind her. He held it open for a moment.

"Vernon tells me Kevin is adopted."

Her body became rigid, weariness forgotten. "Yes." The word was strung out as if she was wary about what came next.

"How old was he at the time?"

She hesitated. "Five."

"Ah. Young enough for you and your husband to raise him right. You should be proud of the job you've done."

The smile told him there was nothing he could have said that would have pleased her more.

He had lunch with Francie and settled down for a short nap on the patio before reporting in. He'd gone back and talked to Kevin. His memory banks weren't as complete as Richie had thought. There was a blank spot between the van smashing into him and waking in the hospital. This one. He didn't remember Rolling Hills, taking off, his odd odyssey, or gold windows.

The brain retained everything, though. Most of it could be recalled with no effort, more with a little prompting, but some experiences needed a special kind of release to find their way to the surface. That much he'd learned in those psychology classes he'd taken, even if those long words had drifted in

one ear and out the other. Deliberately created, he'd always felt, by the psychologists to conceal the fact that they really didn't know much more than anyone else.

No one seemed to care. Medical history wasn't being made, and with enough murder, mayhem, life, and death to fill anyone's day, only a knothead like Richie Palakos would concern himself with the minor mystery of why a badly injured man would stumble more than twenty miles looking for a house with gold windows. The motivation was rendered immaterial by having the man alive and otherwise alert and clear-eyed.

He sighed, swung his feet to the flagstones, half rose, and plopped down again as if the strength had left his legs.

Three phone calls later, he dried sweating palms on his thighs. Maybe Richie Palakos had finally stuck his neck out too far, but to hell with it.

““I’m giving you one of the new cars,” said Seybold.
“Nice,” said Richie. “Judge Clement will appreciate that. Sometime during visiting hours I’ll be driving him to the hospital. The kid he found last night wants to thank him.”

Seybold took a deep breath. *“You running some kind of damned taxi service? If the judge wants to go to the hospital, he can drive himself!”*

“Why don’t you call him and tell him that?” asked Richie mildly. “Hell, your brother doesn’t need his backing in the next election. He’s so smart and popular he can make it on his own.”

Seybold whispered through his teeth, “I’m looking that car over at the end of your shift, smartass. If there’s one goddamn scratch or dent, *you’re out on the street!*”

Richie grinned. “Okay. I’ll ask Clement to endorse me so I can run against your brother in the spring primary. Lot of voting Greeks out there. Since democracy is a Greek invention, they figure they ought to practice it.” He drove out of the lot thinking that Seybold should be studied by that psychology group at the hospital to see how he managed to get dumber each day.

He picked Clement up at seven.

“I don’t know why I consented to this,” said Clement. “Leaves me open to a charge of using the township police for personal reasons.”

“The trip will go down as police business, judge.”

"What kind of police business?"

"I'll think of something."

Clement grinned. "I have an idea you will."

Richie introduced him to Mrs. Klinger and stepped out into the hall as the conversation in the room followed the usual script. Clement wished the figure in the bed a speedy recovery and joined him.

"You talked me into doing my good deed for the day, Palakos, although why is beyond me."

"Take a good look at him," said Richie. "Forget all the damned tubes and that bandage around his head. Who does he look like?"

Clement's look through the open door turned into a stare. "Good Lord," he said shakily. He turned to Richie and lifted a trembling fist. "Palakos, if this is some sort of joke—"

"Let's walk down the hall," said Richie. At the end of the corridor, he turned to a pale Clement. "I don't know what it is, but it's no joke. After seeing him cleaned up, I had the feeling I'd seen him before, but I realized it wasn't that at all. He looked like you. Same build, same facial structure. Then his boss told me Kevin had been adopted. Mrs. Klinger said he'd been five at the time, but she hesitated. I've never known a

mother to hesitate for one second when asked about the age of one of her children. A father, yes, but never a mother, natural or adoptive. And the subject made her uncomfortable. I wondered why. I didn't want to push for answers or upset her. She'd had a hard enough time, and I really had no right to question her at all. So I called out there this afternoon. There is no record of such an adoption. I also talked to the editor of the local paper. The plane your son was flying crashed ten miles from the Klinger farm. It was assumed that your son, his wife, and your grandson died in the crash, but because the plane burned, the remains were difficult to identify. There was some question when they sifted through the wreckage but—three were aboard, so three must have died—"

"Oh my God," said Clement weakly. "There was no way to be sure . . ."

"One more point. I wondered from the beginning what made him take off in this direction when he left Rolling Hills—"

Clement's eyes went wide. "*Rolling Hills?*"

"Exactly. Where your daughter-in-law's parents lived. The boy would have been back and forth a hundred times even at five, and a smart one would have remembered the way."

For a moment, Clement's face slipped into a sudden fury. *"God, if this is true . . . how could that woman—"*

"We'll ask," said Richie, "but if he really *is* your grandson, I'll bet they simply never connected him with that crash. Before you start throwing your weight around, remember this. They did a fine job of raising him, and no one could ask for more. Now we're going to talk to her. Quietly, sensibly, and rationally. And I warn you. I don't care who you are or what you are, if you raise your voice to her, I'll throw you out of the room."

They'd found the boy in their back yard one morning, trembling and dumb from shock, bruised but otherwise uninjured. They'd taken him in and she'd nursed him, and gradually he'd come out of it but with no memory and no answers to questions about his name or where his parents were. Yes, they knew about the plane, but all aboard had died, hadn't they? If by some miracle *that* boy had survived, how could a five-year-old have traveled more than ten miles in the dark? Couldn't possibly be him. More likely he'd been abandoned along the road by a sub-human parent or parents. They'd checked that out qui-

etly. And the missing children reports. Nothing. So. Turn him over to the authorities to be placed in a home when they'd always wanted children but been unable to have any? No way. No one was going to take this gift away from her. A nephew, they told everyone. Son of his brother in Indiana who had died. Papers? No problem for two solid, churchgoing members of a small community who would never lie.

By the time she was finished, she and Clement were both crying and Richie was hoping the judge had forgotten that threat to throw him out of the room.

He patted his tie, stepped back, and examined himself in the mirror. No question about it. Even in the new suit, no one would ever mistake him for someone of importance.

"The suit brings out the sexiness of your dark eyes," said Francie.

"What it brings out is my fat stomach." Richie grinned. "But if it makes me look all that sexy, maybe we should be late."

"If you think I'm passing up a dinner with Judge Clement, Mrs. Klinger, and Kevin for a tumble with you, which I can have any time, you're crazy. Besides, do you know how much this dress cost?"

It was a low-cut, off the shoulder off-white that went nicely with her olive skin. She'd knock 'em dead.

"I don't want to know," he said. "Let's go."

In the car, she said, "You're not going to wear that good suit to work, are you? I mean, now that you're a county detective—what did you tell Seybold when he said you got the job by sucking up to the judge?"

"I told him not to be bitter because he was too dumb to pass the exam."

Which was true, but knowing the judge hadn't hurt at all.

He turned into the driveway of the Clement house. The road curved gently around the lawn and the pond to the house on the hill.

He stopped. "Francie, did you ever think how great it is to be a kid? Something new to be discovered and wondered at every day? All of it stays with you, but you can't possibly recall everything without a little help."

"That's what makes family gatherings such fun, Richie."

"I was thinking of your own little secrets. This is one of mine. I used to come here and think how nice it would be to live in a house with a big lawn and my own duck pond. I was sitting here one evening, pushing my luck because if I didn't

get home before dark I'd be in big trouble—"

Minutes passed. The long shadows of the trees slowly slid up over the westward-facing house.

Suddenly, the setting sun aligned itself with a fissure in the trees. Like a celestial spotlight, a narrow beam bathed the house in soft yellow and reflected from the windows with a gold so brilliant it hurt the eyes; a phenomenon that could occur for a few days only twice a year and had lasted through the decades only because none of the trees had fallen to the elements or a chain saw.

"To me it was just another wonder that went with the house," said Richie slowly. "Like the way the ducklings strung out behind the mother and trailed her wherever she went. No great reason to remember it. But to a five-year-old who lived here—"

Francie let her breath out slowly as the shadows crept back.

"Have you told Kevin?"

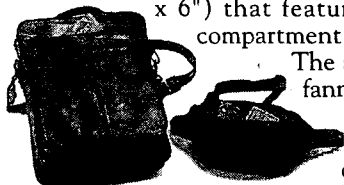
"No. I can't see that it matters now."

He grinned as he put the car in gear. "And speaking of memories, I hope the judge doesn't remember he once promised to shoot me if I ever set foot on his property again. He never could stand trespassing kids."

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Do you love the look of exquisite leather but hate the price tag? If so, this incredible offer is perfect for you. Read on for the details of these four handsome pieces of top grain genuine black leather. First, there is a stunning yet totally functional canvas lined carry-on. Compact (18" x 6" x 15") and lightweight yet spacious, this sleek carry-on features seven exterior compartments and two roomy interior pockets. Durable construction, a double handle with grips and adjustable, detachable shoulder strap make this the perfect luggage piece for any trip. Second, handsome detailing and sturdy construction make our Knapsack second to none. It measures (12" x 5.5" x 15") and the roomy main compartment closes with a draw string and buckle flap while three extra pockets offer plenty of extra room. Brass rivets and double stitching reinforce stress point areas. So functional yet so good looking—this knapsack is in a class by itself. Third, there is a tailored black leather men's shoulder bag that makes a classic fashion statement. The sleek design is a perfect size (9.5" x 12" x 3") and features a spacious zippered main compartment with 1 inside and 2 outside zippered pockets. The adjustable shoulder strap is detachable, and the bag can be carried by its sturdy grip handle. Lastly, there is a deluxe black leather zippered fanny pack (10" x 3.5" x 6") that features both an extra zippered outside compartment and a hidden zippered back pocket.



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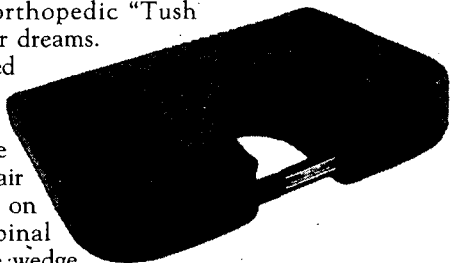
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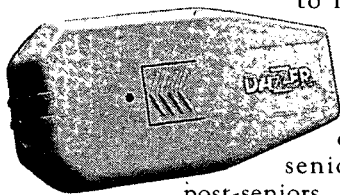
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FICTION

Go Tell It to the Mountain

by Dan Crawford

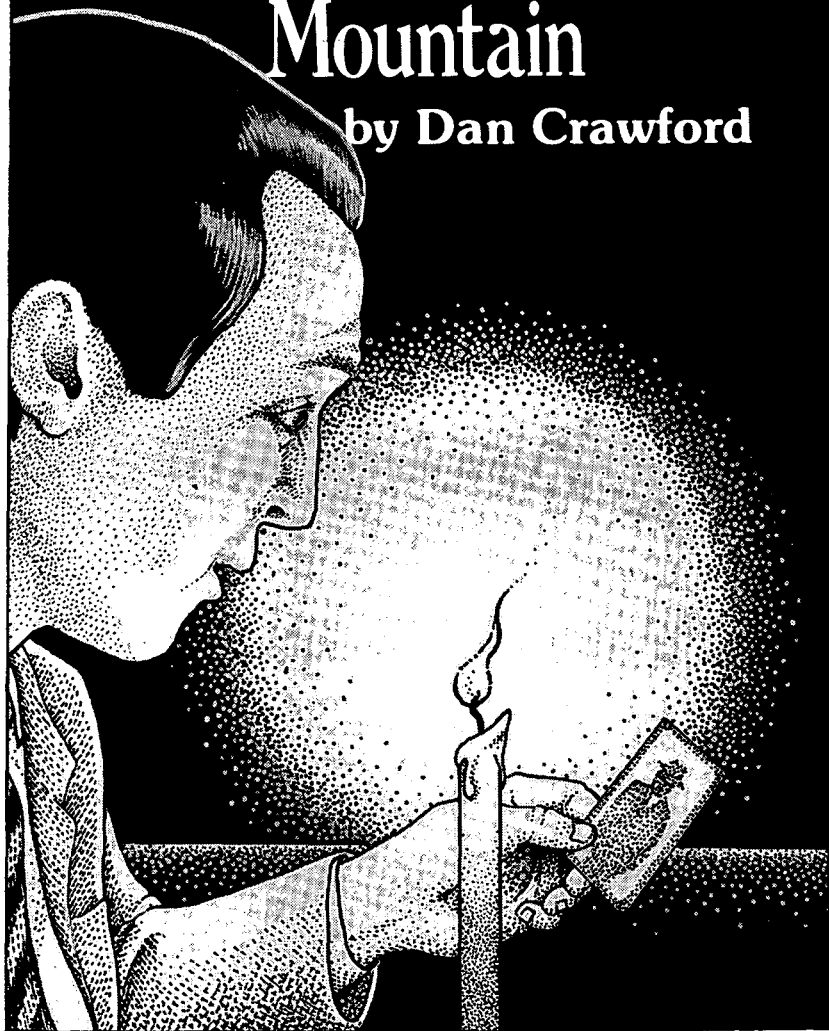


Illustration by Laurie Davis

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eric moved a branch of candles one-sixteenth of an inch to the right. It didn't need it. The table and room were just about perfect. But he had time before his clients got here, and there was a chance he'd spot something that would make all the difference to this presentation. He stepped over to the light switches to dim the overheads a little more. Then he brightened them a bit.

He needed this sale. His Stand-Up Comics Trading Cards had done fairly well, and the company that bought up the concept of his Dogs and Cats of the Funny Pages Trading Cards had not done badly for itself, either. But even the brilliance of his sales smile would not make them forget his more recent concepts, the fiasco of Flower Language Trading Cards and Great Fantasy and Science Fiction Writer Trading Cards. He had to convince them that this concept would make up for those losses.

Eric stepped up to the front of the table. Just fine, just fine: muted tablecloth, matching curtains with the blowups of various cards hidden behind them. The multitude of flickering candles gave it just the right touch, communicating solemnity without getting absurd about it. He had arranged the

prototype cards around the outer edge of the table so they wouldn't look like some kind of offering on an altar.

He dropped to one knee to see that the little fans of cards were perfectly spaced and evenly distanced. In the eight clusters was one each of the eight categories of Religious Icon Trading Cards. The blue-bordered cards were for prophets, brown-bordered ones for writers. Red for martyrs, white for heads of churches, green cards for missionaries, gold for deities, purple for evil beings, and yellow for the sacred writings: he had carefully picked and chosen these prototypes from an even-handed list of possibilities from all the more popular religions.

The piles were well-spaced and perfectly fanned. Eric stood up and frowned. Probably just the light, but . . .

He leaned forward to count without touching the display. Eight cards there, eight cards there . . . eight . . . eight . . . eight . . . eight . . . eight . . . nine! But that made sixty-five cards, and a sheet held only sixty-four.

After a glance back at the door to be sure Sue wasn't escorting the money into the room, Eric spread out that eighth fan. His eyes bulged at meeting his own eyes, staring up from a card obviously drawn

by the same artist who had done the others.

Now, how had those jokers managed it, he thought, flipping the card over. They'd even printed the back in imitation of the others. He'd set these up not more than ten minutes ago, saving them for last so they wouldn't get wax dripped on them or anything. And he'd have sworn on a stack of the yellow cards that no one had been any farther into the room than the door since then.

His eyes went to the little cartoon beneath the biography, where a man with confusion marks in his eyes was looking from a pack of cards to a magazine. The caption said, "Eric pioneered the first general religious trading cards back in the nineties, despite his earlier connection with a pornographic tabloid called *Stripes*."

Now, who in the name of all that was pretty told them about that? Even Sue didn't know that. He'd written those articles under the name Tim Angelino. And what about "back in the nineties"?

He brought the card closer to his eyes to check the tiny line

under the cartoon. "International Copyright 2011," it claimed.

And then the date disappeared. Eric jumped back free of the table before he dropped the burning card. Being more used to fluorescent bulbs than flames, he'd gotten too close to the candles while making out the date.

Kicking at the card, he extinguished the flame, but there was nothing left of the cardboard collectible but ash. He swung around as the door opened.

"They'll be here in two minutes," Sue whispered, and pulled her head back out.

Eric knelt to scoop up the ash. But now it was gone.

He rose, straightening his tie. Well, maybe this was a sign they'd buy the concept. He just wished he'd lingered a little more over the front of the card before turning it over to read the back.

The door opened, and he stepped forward, his smile in place. Surely it had been a brown border. In such confusion, anyone could have mistaken brown for red.

FICTION

Hot Oil

by Steve
Corwin

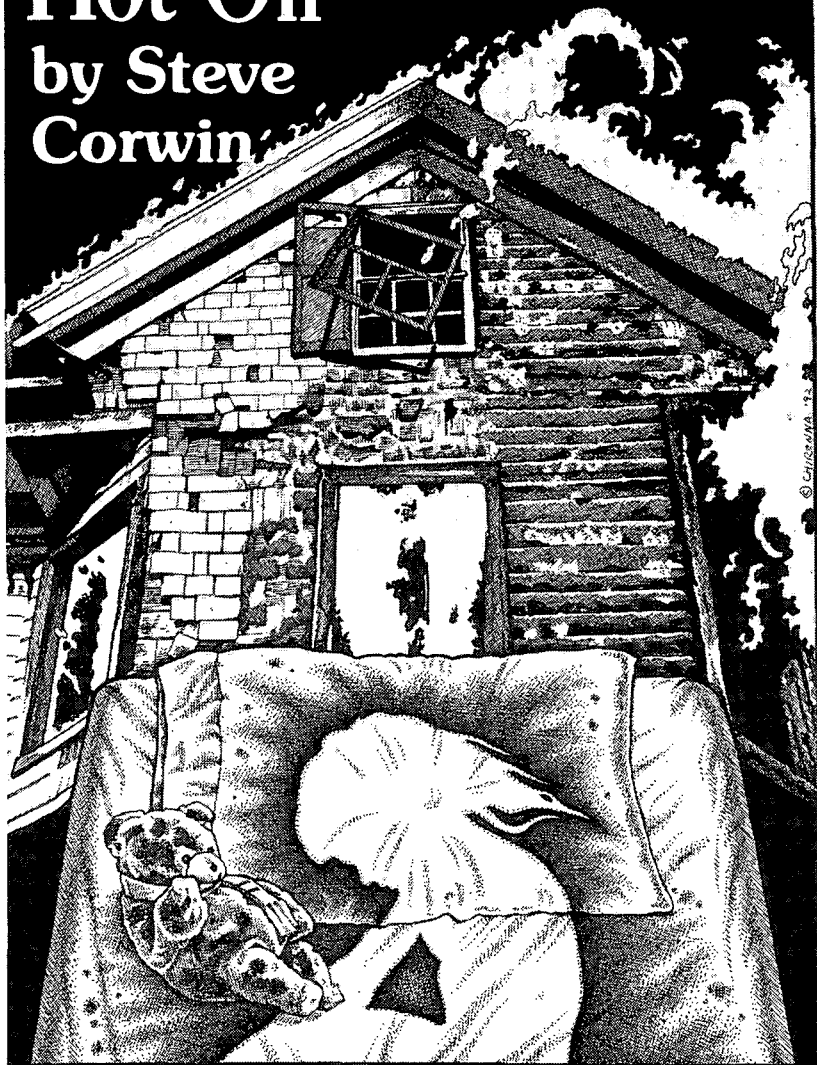


Illustration by Ron Chironna

49

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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“Mr. McLean, we know it’s a two-bit fire; however, for form’s sake someone needs to look at it. Our exposure is minor, but . . .” The agent leaned forward, the tips of his splayed fingers turning white as he pressed the desk-top, “Am I boring you?”

McLean yawned as he pulled his eyes away from the window with its view of soggy winter streets. His gaze rested on the florid face behind the desk. “No, I’m not bored, just wondering if the child’s mother finds it a two-bit annoyance.”

The insurance man pushed his glasses back up his nose. “I wouldn’t know. Here’s the file. The child’s name was Natalie Striker. Her mother is Annabelle Sloan, who . . .” his lips peeled back, exposing sharp teeth, “has been after us for the payoff even though the fire was only yesterday.”

McLean bit back the obvious retort, that a low-rent operation like Rocky Point Indemnity should expect its clients to march through the door within hours of the need. If only to reassure themselves the office hadn’t reverted to a broom closet.

Instead he made a fist, the flannel shirtsleeve bulging under the strain, and said, “Perhaps she needs funeral money.”

The agent’s attitude meant nothing. His concern was keeping the books neat and the profits high. Probing the fire was McLean’s job. One he was good at. Very good. If it wasn’t arson, he’d do his best to make the insurance company pay off. If it was, he’d nail the torch. A pursuit his lawyer called obsessive. But she’d said it with a trace of approval.

McLean rose abruptly and took the file off the desk. He skimmed it, noted the woman was now in a transient hotel only two blocks from where he stood, but she’d have to wait. A visit to the fire scene came first.

Telling the agent he’d have the report by Wednesday, McLean turned for the door. As his hand brushed the tarnished brass a petulant voice chased after him. “It’d better be, and it better be good. If you weren’t the only game in town . . .” The voice faded. “Just do it.”

The two story cottage sat by itself at the end of a twisting country lane incongruously called Beaver Brook Drive, just outside the city limits. Late afternoon sunlight broke through the rolling overcast and glittered off an old millpond a hundred feet beyond the building. A singed curtain stirred uneasily in an upstairs window.

McLean took a drawing pad and slogged back up the driveway to a small rise in the middle of a weed-choked field. He mapped the property in a few deft strokes, not that there was much to sketch. The driveway slithered up to the boarded back door. The building's small front porch faced the pond and pumphouse that leaned toward the brackish water. The water slapped at a rotted dock. The scene struck him as typically southern Oregon.

He climbed into the back of his truck, slipped into a pair of insulated coveralls, and warmed his hands on a hunter's heater while reviewing the cursory report filed by the local volunteer fire department. He stretched and shook himself, forcing the world into focus. He'd moved to the mountains near Rogue Valley two years ago, hoping that the heavy physical labor of rebuilding the old family homestead would drive away the devils that tormented his sleep. The move met with limited success. Particularly limited for the past week. The dreams came in cycles, and they were at their peak again.

According to the scribbled notes, the alarm sounded at two A.M., Sunday. The first unit on the scene, a pumper with a water cannon, arrived at five

past two, along with a crew of two. An unidentified man was spraying the fire with a garden hose. The chief and five more firefighters arrived at two fifteen.

Heavy grey smoke was pushing from the house when the pumper arrived. The first crew dropped a hard-suction hose into the pond, hooked up the water cannon, and fought the fire from the outside. No one entered the building until after the flames were knocked down at three A.M.

A county deputy, arriving with the engine, broke his thumb restraining Annabelle Sloan, who kept lunging toward the house. Paramedics treated the deputy at the scene. They sedated the mother and shipped her off to the county hospital for observation.

McLean winced at the next part. Searchers found a four-year-old girl's badly burned body in an upstairs bedroom. He was almost relieved that a preliminary autopsy found high carbon monoxide levels in her blood. She'd probably died in her sleep, never knowing the searing agony of twelve hundred degree heat.

He walked around the trash-littered yard slowly, careful not to slice his boots on the glass shards embedded in the mud. The area stank of burned wood,

paint, and plaster. The clapboards above each downstairs window showed heavy V-shaped charring where the dragon, having hit the first floor ceiling, chased after the nearest source of air.

Thin ice cracked underfoot as he pushed the smashed front door open and stepped into the hallway. His foot clipped the melted remnants of an old rotary phone lying near the entrance. The fire's path, as easy for the experienced eye to follow as tracks through a wheatfield, led into the kitchen. To the stove. He whipped off his hard hat and rapped his thigh in short angry bursts. The water cannon's damage took over where the flames left off. The room showed unmistakable signs of a smoke explosion, which would mean a botched attack. On top of that, the cannon had blasted everything in the room into a soggy heap in one corner.

He sifted through the pile, down to the cooking utensils and a bottomless four quart cooking pot. He set it aside, then knelt in front of the stove and dug into the charred wood with a pocket knife. The splinter smelled unmistakably of vegetable oil. He dropped the wood into an evidence bag, his mind searching unsuccessfully after a small memory as his

eyes moved from stove to pot to floor.

The ceiling overhead creaked, and thumb-sized bits of plaster skittered off his head and shoulders. McLean turned slightly, aiming his better ear, the left one, toward the hallway stairs. Broken glass crunched underfoot with his movement, and he wished for the hundredth time that his former employer, Santa Clarita Metro Fire, had seen fit to issue earplugs along with his captain's badge. He smiled ruefully, knowing they couldn't issue the brains to use them.

Something on the second floor picked its way over fallen debris with a stealthy shuffling. McLean thought it was probably a child, drawn irresistibly to the forbidden excitement of an abandoned house. He called out, not expecting an answer, then slipped down the dark hall to the stairs. The oak risers, burned through in spots, were the color of badly cooked meat.

He studied the narrow, charcoaled stairwell, then slowly picked his way up the ice-slicked treads, all the while keeping up a reassuring patter. The last thing he wanted was a panicked kid diving out a window.

The heavy slapping of feet followed by a grunted curse

stopped McLean in mid-stride. Adult noises.

He picked up his pace, curious now, and searched the top three rooms quickly, finding only broken glass, water-damaged furniture, and other fire detritus. The room to the right, where the last noise came from, looked like a master bedroom. A door at the head of the stairs opened into a cubbyhole bathroom dominated by an ancient claw-foot bathtub. To the left, scorched child's clothing littered a tiny bedroom.

In the big room, soggy heaps of plaster lay underneath jagged holes where firefighters had chased down hot spots with axes and hoses. Sludgy grey footprints left by their turnout boots crisscrossed the floor.

They were overlaid by another set that looked like cowboy boots whose pointed toes headed straight for a window and the porch roof. A pair of skidmarks in the thin, crusty ice cut a clean path down the roof's curled asphalt shingles and disappeared over the edge.

He knew at a glance that it would be impossible to track a herd of bison through the yard's churned mud, let alone a single rabbiting person. McLean cocked his head but didn't hear the pickup being driven off. A mixed blessing. He stared thoughtfully toward

the sullen pond, his fingers beating a tattoo on the windowsill. An overgrown logging road snaked along the water's edge, cutting through a thicket of spindly fir trees. The raucous flatulence of a diesel truck's engine brake drifted toward the house from beyond the grove.

He ran his fingers over the window rail's bleached edges, then turned and inspected the room with a mixture of compassion and revulsion. Compassion for any fire victim. Waking up disoriented, choking in thick smoke, unsure if it was nightmare or reality, had to be the most frightening experience in anyone's life.

But this room. He kicked an empty whisky bottle across the floor toward a pile of shattered cohorts in one corner, opposite the double bed with its fatigued springs and chipped iron bedstead. Too much booze, too many fires.

He sketched and photographed the entire house, starting downstairs in the kitchen. There he noticed that the fire had behaved oddly in one corner where it attacked the ceiling with a vengeance around a plugged hole that once had housed a stovepipe.

The child's bedroom was last. He'd always hated children's deaths, any fireman does, but his own loss made the chore al-

most unbearable. Yet it goaded him. He understood what drove firesetters. Their own fear, rejection, loneliness. He knew pyros often suffer from profound shame, and his interview technique consisted of a gentle, understanding approach. That didn't stop him from wanting to strangle them.

He approached the room cautiously and stood in the doorway, eyes riveted on the intruder's smeared tracks that stopped in front of a splintered pine toybox. Shutting his eyes, he rubbed a triangular burn scar on his neck viciously. The box, a design taken from an old issue of *Popular Mechanics*, was identical to one he'd built for his son. He turned slightly and opened his eyes, only to find himself staring at the bed and the small white outline of a child's body, etched on the fire-scorched bedding.

The room dissolved in a watery sheen, and he started hyperventilating. It was worse, far worse than the first time he'd run out of air in a fire department breathing apparatus, and that had been like having a plastic bag jerked over his head.

Leaning forward slightly, he forced his body to relax and his breathing into a slow, steady rhythm. He shut out the next few minutes, hiding behind his

camera, automatically shooting, cocking, shooting until the film ran out.

McLean bolted from the room and half-stumbled down the stairs to his truck and fresh air. Tomorrow he had to face the woman who'd lost a child. He could wait. A lifetime.

“**M**rs. Sloan?” The puffy-eyed woman in the door nodded yes with a sullen jerk of her head. She clenched the neck of a faded cotton robe in a half-successful effort at modesty. She looked about forty, close to McLean's age, and still built for speed.

“I'm P. J. McLean, from the insurance company.” He stood quietly, feeling a tinge of guilt, since the unfinished introduction held out the promise of early payment. He didn't believe this woman was guilty of anything more heinous than wanting to put these grimy rooms behind her. But someone had been in the house on Beaver Brook Drive, and he wanted to know why.

Annabelle Sloan's blank look slid off her visitor, down to the floor. She had the wary look of someone who'd spent a lifetime finding cops on her doorstep.

If McLean's half-truthful introduction brought any joy, she

concealed it masterfully. "Just gimme the check, mister." Her flat Texas twang betrayed no emotion, and the fine-boned hand she held out was rock steady.

McLean looked to the hand, then to her feet. If she'd been wearing the intruder's boots, they'd have fit like snowshoes. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Sloan. I wasn't very clear. I'm investigating the fire. Purely routine, but necessary. Someone else will bring the check."

"What?" The grieving mother's hand tightened convulsively at her throat. Their eyes locked briefly before she sagged against the door frame. In that quick look he saw bitterness and something else. Something like shock.

"How can you people do this? My baby's dead. Ain't nothin' gonna bring her back. She's dead, don't you see? But I gotta go on livin'." Her voice rose from an almost slurred mumble to a near scream as she wobbled away from the door and threw herself onto a threadbare couch, burying her head in her hands. McLean closed the door softly, his stomach churning with self-loathing.

Before he could say anything, the only other door in the room flew open and a wiry man in briefs and a tank top burst out. "What's going on? All this

damn racket. Can't a guy get no sleep around here?"

The newcomer stopped abruptly, and his rope-veined arms shot up defensively. "Who's he?"

Annabelle's face remained buried, but her muffled voice carried a hint of warning. "An insurance guy."

The newcomer unclenched his rising fists and calmly ran both hands through a mop of coal-black hair.

McLean studied the man but addressed the woman. "I apologize for upsetting you. If you'd like me to come back..." He let the sentence hang.

Annabelle Sloan leaned back and made an ineffectual pass at her eyes with one hand. The robe sagged open, exposing a firm body clad only in lacy black underpants and brassiere. They looked a lot more expensive than the robe, which she casually pulled shut.

"No, you have questions, ask them. I got nothin' to hide, have I, Jerry?"

Her roommate, who'd already reversed course, turned abruptly at the bedroom door. "Of course not." He aimed his answer like a mallet at the back of her head.

She ground a ringless fist into the couch and sobbed, "You people got no right. To come sneaking around like I'm

some kind of criminal. You don't know what it's like to lose a baby."

McLean flinched but remained silent.

Jerry reappeared in the doorway, jammed into a pair of black jeans. He tucked in a half-open red western shirt with imitation pearl snaps, then combed his freshly oiled hair into an Elvis-era ducktail.

McLean knew the type. A drugstore cowboy whose closest encounter with a horse was at a parimutuel window.

Annabelle's roommate swaggered over to a chrome and plastic kitchen table overflowing with liquor bottles and fast food containers. He grabbed a fifth of Monarch by its neck and took a deep swig, but his eyes never left McLean's face.

Ignoring the stare, McLean pulled a stool close to the couch. He sat down, flipped open his notebook, and looked at Natalie Striker's mother. The woman made him uncomfortable. Her moves and moods seemed too calculated, her eyes too dry.

"I know you've been over this before, but please tell me everything that happened yesterday morning."

Annabelle Sloan nodded, then recited her story in a monotone.

It had started in the kitchen.

They liked fried chicken, done in a deep pot of vegetable oil. Just like her mother had made it, and her grandmother before her. Annabelle made a small, helpless shrug. "'Course we drink a little, too. We bin drinkin', and around midnight I got the hungers for some chicken. We drank some more and I guess I forgot the pot on the stove. It was stupid."

She looked McLean straight in the eye, unflinching. Her voice again crept up. "I done it, all right? I got drunk and stupid and I killed my little girl, my little Natalie. I gotta live with that, mister. I gotta live with that all my life."

McLean shifted uncomfortably. "And you woke up to smoke? About what time?"

"Yeah, to smoke. Had no smoke alarm. No clock, neither." She looked thoughtful for a second. "Ain't that against the law? A rental with no smoke alarm?"

Jerry set down the whisky bottle with a warning thump but didn't say anything.

"Yes, it is. Now, what did you do next?"

"I ran, dammit. I jumped out the window, onto the porch roof, and left my baby to die. Ain't you heard enough?"

McLean rubbed the scar on his neck. "You both went out the window? Did you close it af-

terward? You know, to keep the fire from spreading?"

Annabelle Sloan bit her lip and faltered. "We just went out the window. Acourse we didn't close it."

McLean nodded, more to himself than her. "And the kitchen door? Was it closed?"

Jerry moved away from the table with an explosive burst. "What the hell does all this have to do with anything? Just sign the damn check."

McLean eyed him calmly. "I'm simply trying to picture what happened, how the fire developed. That's all."

Jerry settled against the table in something like a sulk. "Door to the kitchen was closed. We didn't want to wake the kid."

Standing up, McLean moved toward the door. "Just one more question. Who called the fire department?"

Jerry answered immediately. "I did. I grabbed the phone by the bed and dialed 911. Then I got outa there, too." If he felt bad about leaving the girl to die, McLean couldn't tell it.

As if reading McLean's thoughts he added, "Hey, man. I'm sorry about the girl, okay? But a guy's gotta look out for himself, 'cause no one else will."

"But you did try to put out

the fire with a hose, Mr. . . ."

Jerry paused, picked up the almost empty whisky bottle, and tapped it on his thigh before answering. He turned his head to look out the window. The strong profile, almost like a Jefferson-head nickel with its high forehead and strong nose, was marred by the weak chin. "Smith, Jerry Smith. Of course I tried to put the fire out. I ain't an animal, man. I did try." Even though he faced the window, McLean caught a reflected smirk as Smith killed the bottle.

McLean paused in the doorway. "Funny, I don't remember finding a phone in the bedroom. I think I'll have the lab go over it. They should find something."

He shut the door gently on Annabelle Sloan's chalky face and the unmistakable crash of a hurled bottle.

Stepping through the hotel's crumbling portico, McLean tugged his coat collar up against the December drizzle and walked slowly to the pickup and a noon interview with the first two firefighters on the scene.

He couldn't shake Annabelle Sloan's contradictory image. She couldn't have left her child to die. No mother could. He shivered uncontrollably, think-

ing of one mother who died trying to save her son. Their son.

Sliding through the sparse traffic toward the cafe where the meeting was to take place, he mulled over the real problem he faced. Natalie's mother admitted setting the fire. Not on purpose, but by accident, and he knew from bitter experience that it was almost impossible to prove otherwise.

The Ford pickup rolled to a stop in front of the backwater cafe where the two firemen had agreed, reluctantly, to meet McLean. Like most volunteers, they had paying jobs and probably resented giving up their lunch hour. An appeal to their pride as unpaid lifesavers, and the promise of a free lunch, had bought a few minutes of their time.

The pair, one short and skinny, the other tall, about McLean's height, and thick-muscled, lounged side by side in a booth. They were getting as good as they gave to the red-haired waitress of indeterminate years and thick calves. McLean knew them all by sight.

The men nodded guardedly as McLean slid into the booth's vacant seat. Skinny tried on a thin smile. "This is on you, right?"

McLean, keeping a poker face, said, "Yeah, just don't or-

der the seafood plate."

The waitress shot him a hard look and slammed a ceramic coffee mug down. "That was a blasted accident, and nobody had anything worse than a stomach ache."

Her discomfort only made the two mill workers grin and relax, but McLean regretted the cheap shot, even if it had loosened the other two up. In silent atonement, he ordered the largest lunch on the menu, knowing the heavy grease would extract its own price.

As the waitress steamed off toward the counter, McLean pulled his notebook out. It was time to get down to business, even if the two men couldn't add much to the official reports. He preferred the face-to-face approach because sometimes talking through an incident would unearth some small but telling detail.

The pair edged toward the topic, probably glad to share the experience with someone who'd been there. Firemen, even volunteers, find it difficult to talk about a job with civilians, and that includes everyone outside the service, sometimes even their wives.

Besides, this was a major structure fire, something that doesn't come along all that often in a small rural department. They didn't get fire

deaths very often, either, and this one clearly bothered them. Toying with his food, the smaller man said, "We're both fathers, and I guess we kinda wonder why they left the girl."

McLean sipped the bitter coffee and watched their faces. "They told you she was in there?"

Both firemen stared at their plates. Finally the big one looked up, pain and defiance carved into his face. "We know it looks bad, but dammit . . ." His massive fist kneaded a wad of paper napkins. "It was weird. The whole thing was weird. First you gotta understand about the pumper. The governor at the pump don't work, so one guy has to stand there and keep the crappy engine revs up just to maintain water pressure."

His skinny companion looked up from the plate of eggs and fries that had arrived along with McLean's platter. "We've been trying to get that dog-licker fixed for months, but the county . . ." He looked like he wanted to spit, but settled for a sip of coffee. "Money for cops, not firemen. The hell with 'em."

His companion shrugged and went on, "Anyway, that means only one guy could go in the building 'cause no one else was there yet, and that building was chuffing, man. Even in the

dark you could tell. No flame visible, but smoke was blowing out every little crack, and the guy ran over and started yelling at us to get the Stang gun on it, that it was the only way to save her."

McLean looked up sharply, "Save her?"

The little man seemed to shrink into the seat. His partner's fist hit the table so hard that every head in the room snapped around. "I thought he meant the damn house. He didn't say a child. Just 'her.'" The pain in his voice was so evident that McLean looked away, embarrassed for both of them, and himself.

McLean gazed through the grease-frosted panes and said without turning his head, "He used that term, the Stang gun?"

"Yeah, you know, the water cannon."

McLean smiled faintly at the implied ignorance. "Then what?"

The thin man sighed and pushed his plate away. "So we had no real choice anyway and hit the kitchen window." He seemed to recoil at the memory. "Almighty hell broke loose. We've never had a smoke explosion before, but I guess that damn fire'd been going for a while. Long enough to use up enough air so that it started to

smolder. When we broke the window with the stream and that air got in there, Christ, I thought I was dead. Glass, hot gases, flame, smoke."

McLean nodded occasionally as the two took turns finishing off the story. Help arrived only minutes after the blast, including another pumper, and with the pond to draw from the fire was quickly knocked down. He knew it was a minor irony, having that pond; rural departments almost always have to bring water with them, and high volume use such as this was a luxury.

They didn't remember any more about the couple, other than seeing the deputy struggle with Annabelle Sloan.

Skinny belched behind a closed fist. "The guy was funny, you know? He had that dinky little garden hose out when we pulled in, but he was being real careful, it seemed to me anyway, not to hit those kitchen windows. Kinda like he knew what'd happen if he broke the glass. Funny, too, he didn't stick around."

The weightlifter drained his coffee and made a face. "I remember seeing him get in the ambulance with her. Didn't think anything of it at the time, but when we went to overhaul, I found that child." His bulk seemed to shrink as he ran both

hands over his bowed head. His shoulders heaved slightly.

McLean pushed his cup around in small circles, waiting silently.

Finally the big man looked up, the distress still evident in his eyes, but his voice was steady. "It was so damn stupid. But then most fires are, I guess. There are innocent ways, though..." His voice trailed off slightly then came back. "Spontaneous combustion, bad wiring, mixing the wrong liquids. Hell, I've even heard of flashbulbs setting off gas fumes, but this... a kitchen fire that could have been prevented. But I hear they were drunk."

He looked down at his hands. "They didn't seem drunk, but we were too busy to really notice." He sighed, nudged his partner, and they rose from the table.

At the door he looked back. "Let us know what you find out, okay?" His eyes carried the haunted look of someone filled with self-reproach, afraid he'd screwed up. Afraid maybe, just maybe, he could have done something better. That he could have saved a life.

McLean just nodded, then rose and paid the bill, left an overgenerous tip, and drove home.

He couldn't get the fireman's

eyes out of his mind as he souped, then printed, the film he'd taken the day before. He'd had the feeling himself and knew how hard it was to live with. Shuffling around in the darkroom's chemically-charged air reminded him, through some obscure chain of association, of why the oil in Annabelle Sloan's floor triggered an elusive memory, and now he knew where to look. But first he sat down with the color prints as they tumbled out of the dryer and studied each one carefully. It took longer than he'd anticipated but was worth the effort.

Later, sitting at his grandfather's rolltop desk, munching on a Maalox tablet, he flipped through several back issues of *Firehouse* magazine.

Finally he found the brief article whose contents had eluded him at the house. The swivel chair groaned as he leaned back, reading and rubbing the scar on his neck. Finally he pulled the phone out of its drawer and made several phone calls, some to Texas and one to his lawyer, the woman who'd started him on this case in the first place.

She wasn't pleased with what he said but agreed to a meeting as soon as he could get there. He checked his watch, then looked at the sun, which

hung just above the horizon. There was work undone, and he left the house hurriedly, knowing time wasn't on his side. He stopped at the entryway closet long enough to drag out a little-used bag of camera accessories. He tossed it on the truck seat and smoothed out his plan of attack as he jounced into town.

Sarah Shallott closed the door firmly, then returned to her desk. She slipped into an oversized leather swivel and stared at McLean over steepled fingers. "If you'll pardon my saying so, you look like road kill."

McLean slouched in the client's chair with a faint smile. "Ah, such a golden tongue. You should be a lawyer."

Sarah's smile carried a trace of fondness. "Well, you're not here to be mothered." She straightened up and nudged a manila folder with a manicured finger. "Look, P. J., I know you have this thing about arsonists, but aren't you jumping off the deep end here? This woman has lost a child. It's a horrible thing."

She looked away quickly, embarrassed. "I don't have to tell you that, I'm sorry. But this . . ."

McLean pushed his own pain down. Pushed it down as he'd been pushing all emotion down

for more than twenty years. Long before Lilly and their son died in a gasoline-fed inferno touched off by her psychotic ex-husband.

His eyes riveted on the legal diploma from Harvard above Sarah's head, he wondered bitterly at the system's failure to protect the innocent. Was it really so difficult to warn a victim when her attacker was paroled? Closing his eyes, he let his thoughts drift back to that cosy bed and breakfast on the Northern California coast. Where he'd taken his unconsecrated family as a treat. A reward for giving him the joy and love denied by his ex-wife.

He blinked rapidly, then stared down at his hands, again wondering why, on that sleepless night two years before, he'd decided to slip out for a silent stroll along the beach. That night, running panic-stricken toward the flames and billowing smoke, he'd lost control. The carefully nurtured power over his temper evaporated when he found their killer gloating in the crowd gathered at the fire's edge.

He glared out the window and again felt the shame of that loss of control. He didn't regret beating Edward Chan almost to death. But before that, in a fire officer's nightmare, he'd managed to let his panic infect

the local firefighters. The result was one more needless death. A rookie volunteer who didn't know better and wanted to be a hero.

Sarah's gentle voice broke the long silence. "Tell me why you think she did this terrible thing."

He looked at her slowly, trying to gather his wits, to remember where he was and what he was doing.

"It looks like an insurance scam. This is her second claim." He looked into Sarah's gentle eyes and went on. "And she's not alone. Other mothers have murdered for profit as well. It's just so grotesque that it's usually overlooked. No fireman ever wants to accuse a grieving woman of having murdered her own issue, and most cops don't even consider it. That's how they get away with it."

He went on for several more minutes as Sarah creased the corner of the folder that belonged to their client, Rocky Point Indemnity.

Finally she said, "What you're saying may make our client happy, but as a lawyer I'm not convinced yet. You say there was a similar case in Texas five years ago. That it happened to a woman named Annabelle Striker." She shrugged eloquently. "There is such a thing as coincidence."

"I don't think so. Natalie's last name was Striker, and Annabelle Sloan was raised by a foster family named Striker. I think Sloan just grabbed the name."

He shifted in the chair and checked his watch. "And that brings up another hole in her story. Annabelle Sloan claimed she made chicken just like mother and grandmother had. That woman never knew her family."

"At any rate, she'd been living with a man named Terry Schmidt, and although the records weren't complete, it was certain he'd been a volunteer fireman with a rural department before the first child's death."

That death hadn't been investigated and Annabelle collected ten thousand dollars within days, then dropped from sight.

McLean gazed at the folder under Sarah's hands as he described a conversation he'd had with the chief of another small Texas town several hundred miles from where the first child died.

"This guy remembers Terry Schmidt pretty well, and his description of the volunteer sounds a great deal like Jerry Smith. More to the point, he recounted a little experiment our man performed on an alumi-

num pot. Drilled a hole in the bottom, covered the hole with a piece of aluminum foil, and set the pot—full of water—on the stove. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out what happened next. Use vegetable oil instead of water and . . ."

McLean let the sentence trail off as he moved restlessly around the room, acutely aware of the heavy shadows curtailing his view of the mountains.

Sarah gave him a peculiar look. "Why not just let the oil boil over? Certainly less complicated."

"Yes, it would be, except they had to be certain. It's possible, just possible, overflowing oil would douse the flame."

McLean stopped pacing and drove for the door. "There's more, but I have an appointment with our questionable couple tonight."

Sarah's startled look dissolved into confusion as he stepped over the threshold and bolted for his truck and a quick run home.

Striding toward the truck he knew it was impossible to reverse history. He couldn't bring back Lilly and Jay. He couldn't breathe life into Natalie Striker, but he could, and by God he would, keep that gro-

tesque couple from breeding any more insurance settlements.

Once in the cab, he loaded the Nikon with infrared film, then picked up a much older, motor-driven Pentax. He eyed it with a trace of affection. His ace in the hole.

There was nothing elaborate about his plan. He'd wait outside the burned house and photograph Smith when he returned to finish the job.

If the Nikon failed, the Pentax, hidden inside the house, would get something. He hoped. The camera was attached to a small battery pack and motion detector. It would shoot as long as there was movement. It was just insurance. He'd collar Smith long before the building went up.

Pushing his hair out of his eyes, he dug through his accessory bag looking for the strobe. His hands brushed aside filters, old lens caps and brushes, even ancient flashbulbs, but no strobe light.

He sat up with a disgusted grunt. He'd lent it to a friend who'd sworn on his mother's grave to have it back within twenty-four hours. McLean hoped the guy's mother would reach out and bat her son. It had been more than a month, and McLean, more interested in finishing his house than in

photography, had forgotten about it.

He examined his old flashgun. It would have to do. After cleaning its contacts and replacing the batteries, he placed it beside the other gear in a canvas bag.

Moonlight sneaking through the thin overcast dappled the driveway as the blacked-out truck crept toward the house. McLean, after a hurried reconnaissance on foot, found that the only adequate hiding place for the vehicle was on the other side of the fire scene, and he pushed as quickly as he dared, afraid a snoopy neighbor would spot him and call the police.

Smith, or Schmidt, or whatever his real name was, hadn't arrived yet, but every passing minute increased the risk they would cross paths, and McLean wanted that to happen on his terms.

He paused long enough to zip up his boiler suit, then crept forward, the bag of tools swinging loosely in one fist, a flashlight in the other. He slipped through the front door and upstairs, pausing often to listen.

His footfalls sounded loud and threatening in the silence, even though he doubted anyone a whisper away would hear

him. He paused at the top of the stairs, rubbed a sweaty hand on his leg, then slid into the master bedroom.

The moon, having broken free of the clouds, painted the walls in stark monochromes, making it easy to find and enlarge one of the holes made by the firefighters. A few jerks on the brittle plasterboard made a spot near the ceiling big enough.

He fumbled a flashbulb out of a pocket, twisted it into place, and secured the camera. He fastened it with screws driven into the wall studs, angling the Pentax so an intruder would be all the way into the room before triggering the flash. With a bulb instead of a strobe, he only had one shot, but he was confident he wouldn't need it.

He scanned the room one last time, stuffed the tools into the bag, set the sensor delay, and scooted out the door.

Scurrying movement in the bathroom made his heart slam into his throat and McLean pivoted toward the sound, the flashlight beam jerking from wall to wall. A hateful red eye glared in his direction. With a disdainful flick of its tail the rat disappeared behind the bathtub.

McLean leaned against the door frame, his labored breathing louder than an old locomotive.

Hot, smoky rooms with zero visibility were a breeze compared to this.

Once outside, he angled toward the pump house's protective shadow. He sprawled beside the building and poked the Nikon's lens through the weeds, toward the front porch. The boarded up rear door almost insured Smith would use the front.

The first half hour passed as slowly as time in a dentist's chair, and despite the occasional unnerving rustle of wind in the treetops and the cold, soggy ground, he fought off an overwhelming desire to sleep.

He couldn't very well sing, so he worked a Payday candy bar out of the boiler suit's breast pocket and chewed it slowly. The crunching peanuts sounded louder than marbles in a tin can.

After jamming the empty wrapper into a pocket he massaged his neck, his movements slow, exaggerated.

The scar, from a burning piece of ceiling, reminded him of those victories that made the job worth it. Twenty years ago he'd saved a toddler. That the boy, now a young man, had chosen to enter the fire service provided no end of gratification.

Closing his eyes, he drifted back into the choking smoke as he scrabbled around the pitch-

black room on his knees, a frantic mother's screams pounding his ears. Hands sweep out, find nothing, sweep again. Eyes almost swollen shut, smoke-driven black mucus sliding down his chin. The touch of something soft. A child's leg. The scramble for the window, a tiny limp body tucked protectively under his bunker coat. The exhilaration when that tiny body began squirming, then crying, as he handed it out to safety, the fire crackling at his back.

His eyes snapped open. The crackling was behind him all right, but it was no fire.

He turned cautiously. Too slowly. A shadowed figure, its face split in a demonic grin, aimed a tree branch at his head. McLean rolled halfway over when the branch connected solidly with the base of his neck and shoulder. A numbing pain shot down his left arm, which he threw up in time to take another blow so hard it shattered the branch. Roaring in fear and anger, he rolled toward the pond, clawing desperately for footing in the freezing mud.

He staggered, braced one foot on a half-buried board, and rose into a crouch, only to take a boot where chest and throat met.

Gagging for air, he wind-

milled backwards into the pond and clipped a half-submerged log. The insulated boiler suit sopped up water and pulled him down.

His terror gave way to acceptance, and he quit struggling as the black, viscous slime closed over his head. Only instinct kept his mouth tightly shut as he rolled over onto his stomach, settling slowly to the bottom in the bone-crushing chill.

As his feet touched bottom a child's head, blurred and androgynous, hovered. Only its mouth was clear. Small, oval, and open. Screaming in pain.

He kicked off the mud, feeling overhead with his good hand, probing for the log, for the slim hope of safety it offered. His numbed fingers scraped along its rough bottom, and he surfaced, gagging for air. He hung there, only his mouth and nose exposed, and sucked in the cold, sweet, sweet taste of life. Slowly, ever so slowly, raised his head. The log's rough profile stood between him and the shore.

A flashlight beam played off the brackish water, touched the log, then moved on.

A female voice giggled. "Shouldn't we kill him?"

The brief silence was broken by a sharp slap and a familiar twang. "Shut up, bitch. I can't hear."

More silence, then the light flicked out. The male voice hissed again. "He's done for. Now get the cans, we ain't got all night."

McLean, losing energy quickly to the water's greedy demand for heat, paddled away from the voices toward the pier's doubtful safety.

The Texans reached the house before he reached the pier. He pulled himself in slow, jerky motions from piling to piling and finally into the mud. He crabbed out of the water; the thin ice along the pond's edges cracked and boomed in his ears. He paused after each painful inch forward, waiting for someone to come out and finish the job.

He rose, shivering violently, took one step, then another.

Even with a cold-deadened nose he could smell the gasoline as the pair worked their way from room to room. Annabelle giggled again. Apparently happy in her work.

A strangled shout from the upper floor told her to shut up or she'd be back in the emergency room.

McLean turned his back to the voice in the upper room, then bent over and vomited the pond's foul water. He stood heaving, breathless, and vividly aware of what he'd done. He'd stopped using flashbulbs

around volatile fumes after a near miss of his own. The bulbs' high surface temperature was deadly. As good as a match.

Jerry Smith's gloating voice floated down from the bedroom above the porch. "Those bums won't find a damn phone or anything else." The hollow ring of a half-full jerry can, followed by the gurgle and slop of frenzied splashing, drifted through the still air just ahead of a harsh bluewhite light that pinned the shadow of a chinless Jefferson to the ground.

The explosion lifted the roof straight up and knocked McLean to his knees. He turned and stared numbly at the raging flames, then crawled slowly toward the fire's soothing warmth.

Sarah Shallot sat calmly. The morning light drifted through the hospital's windows, where it reflected a reddish halo off her auburn hair. "How do you feel?"

McLean twisted into something resembling a comfortable position. "Physically? Okay. They say nothing's broken, and my lungs are clear. I'll be out by noon."

Her appraising look made him glance away. "But?"

"I screwed up. They weren't supposed to die. Smith wasn't

as clever as I thought. They were just a nasty couple in a hurry. And I botched it."

Sarah leaned forward and pressed the back of his hand with her ringed left one. "You never doubted their guilt, did you?"

"No. Not after studying the pictures I took in Natalie's room, of a toybox. It was sitting over a hole in the floor where a stovepipe used to come through, but the burn pattern on the box was wrong. That's when I knew for certain Smith was the intruder. He'd pushed the box over the hole, trying to cover it up. He'd already resealed the hole downstairs. My arrival threw a wrench into his work upstairs. Even so, I almost missed it."

Sarah folded her hands in her lap, waiting.

"He set the fire up so it'd burn slow and dirty. The dirtier the burn, the more carbon monoxide. The hole acted as a chimney and pumped everything into the child's room." McLean

looked away, out the window, toward Mount McLaughlin.

"I knew they'd lied about their escape because the bedroom window rails were clean. If the window was open, they'd have been charred, and they weren't. They had carefully, deliberately, turned the child's bedroom into a gas chamber."

Sarah rose and walked stiffly to the window, trailed by the scent of sandalwood. "So who turned in the alarm?"

McLean coughed. His lungs might be clear, but he'd inhaled enough smoke to turn his throat raw. "They did. I checked with 911. Only they called from downstairs. He waited until the fire had banked in the kitchen, then reached through the front door, made the call, and tossed the phone back inside."

When she finally spoke, Sarah's voice carried the ice of a prosecutor's summation. "They got less than they deserved."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

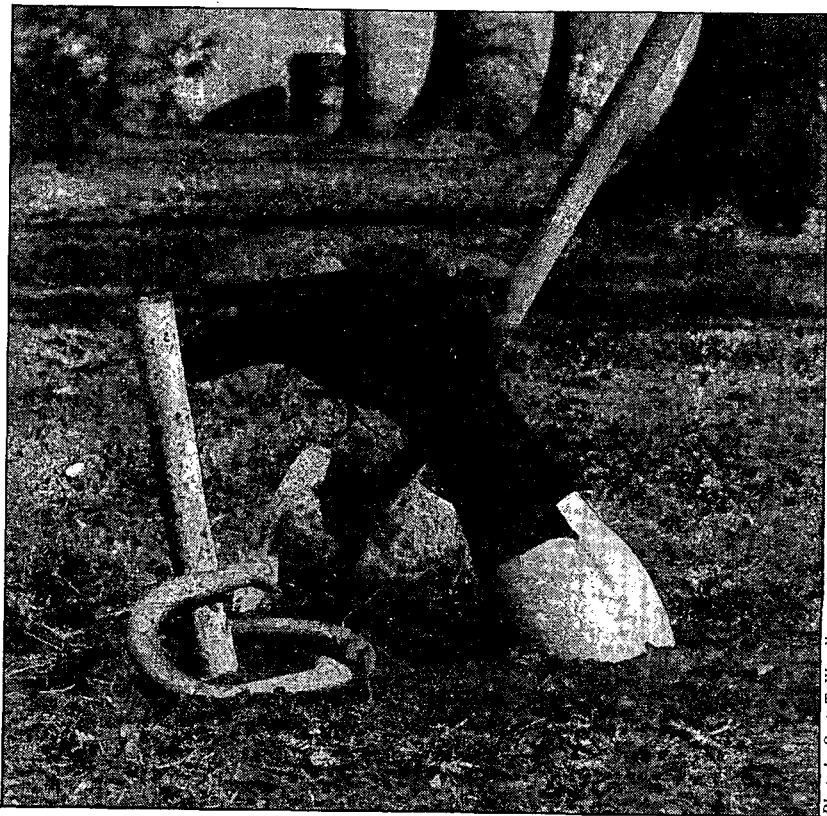


Photo by Scott T. Wendler

Under thrown. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

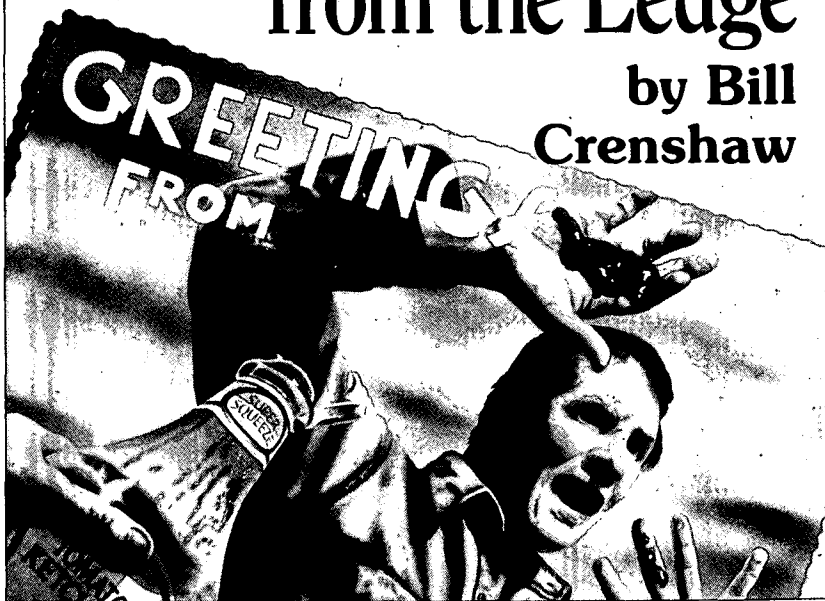
The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION



Postcards from the Ledge

by Bill
Crenshaw



They were trying to tell him something, Adam knew. "Corner office," the department chairman had said. "Marvelous view." He had even managed to keep the irony out of his voice.

But the real irony was that Adam Clay liked being out of the departmental ebb and flow, ensconced in the high tower of Old Main, and he did like the view through the narrow windows that ran like loopholes, floor to twelve foot ceiling.

And tomorrow he had to leave his tower for parts unknown. The curse had come upon him. He had submitted a modest paper noting certain structural similarities among the stories of the Sumerian Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf and Breca, and the Navajo Born of Water and Killer of Enemies, and to his surprise and dismay he had been invited to read at the conference in Flagstaff, Arizona.

"We are delighted," his chairman had said. "Of course you must go. Unfortunately, we can't afford airfare. We can, however, defray some of your driving expenses, unless you had other plans for your spring break . . ."

Had he been a twenty-six-year-old new Ph.D. trying to become a name, it would be wonderful. He wasn't. He was

nearly sixty-one, a tweedy professor with a younger wife and two-year-old twin daughters, and he was interested more in publications that paid in dollars instead of honors. He had tried the paper simply as an intellectual antidote to the sleazy romance he was writing in hopes of making some extra money for little girls' shoes and little girls' dresses, and for him, well, a conference paper wasn't important. Even though he'd never had a conference paper before. Even though he was somewhat proud of having it accepted.

It was out of the question. He still wasn't used to the Suburban. He missed Brunhilde, the 1948 Studebaker he had driven for over forty years, who had ended her sturdy career on a Teutonic funeral pyre in Earl's junkyard by the river, for which Adam still blamed Fat Chance. The Suburban was a monster; he didn't drive it so much as point it where he thought it wanted to go anyway. He hated driving even across town. Drive across country? Impossible.

But that was before Ruth had left Fat Chance again, for good this time, filing for divorce. Fat Chance was despondent, Ginger said, and had Fat Chance not been Adam's brother-in-law, Adam would have felt

sorry for him and invited him over for a dinner or two and that would have been that. But Ginger said that Marvyn loved travel. Ginger said Marvyn still talked about their childhood summer of camping Out West when the family had driven to the Grand Canyon. Adam should go give his paper, she said. It would be good for him. He and Marvyn could Camp Out along the way to save money.

Ginger was usually right about things, but Adam had resisted. Camp Out? "You need a traveling companion, Marvyn needs a friend," Ginger had said. "It will help him. He needs to get away." She had laid her fingertips on Adam's arm. That decided it.

And now Adam stood at the loophole window, looking out over the campus in the late afternoon, high above the turbulent world. He imagined himself drawing a clothyard arrow to his ear, feeling the mighty yew strain against his arm, ready to send the eager steel arrowhead into his target, Fat Chance, who was even now crossing the quad below. Adam's fingers loosed the imaginary shaft. No good. Fat Chance still advanced.

Adam sighed. He'd have to go to Arizona whether he wanted to or not.

Courage, he said.

Adam couldn't tell that Fat Chance was despondent. He seemed distressingly normal, strapping the lawn chairs to the roof of the Suburban, assuring Adam that he'd appreciate them when they Camped Out.

The words "Camp Out" made Adam shudder involuntarily. The idea of sleeping away from his own bed was bad enough, whether hotel, motel, or even, God knew, cabin at the beach. But folding down the back seats of the Suburban, the station wagon on steroids, and zipping into a sleeping bag, well, the mind simply rebelled, didn't it?

And to make things worse was the idea of Fat Chance's actually driving. Fat Chance had always been too eager to get his hands on the Suburban, too graphic in his descriptions of what this truck could do.

"Car," Adam would say feebly.

Fat Chance would look at him sidelong and smile. "Truck," he'd say. "Three-quarter four-wheel-drive ton."

It would take ten or eleven hours at least to Memphis, not including stops. He'd have to let Fat Chance drive. But the thought . . . He'd just have to hold out, that was all. Just grit his teeth and hold out.

They were late getting away, of course, which meant they couldn't possibly make Memphis before dark. Even so, on their way out of town a half hour after dawn, Adam detoured through the quiet campus for his farewell look at the last outpost of civilization as he knew it.

At midmorning they picked up I-40 in North Carolina, near Asheville, heading up into the Great Smokies, all mist and green, old mountains, comfortable mountains, while those Out West, he understood, were young and angry and sharp edged, lawless and untamed. He knew he must be wrong, but all he could see when he imagined Out West was a hundred shades of brown and the sun glinting off the flashing spurs of the gunslinger calling him into the street for a showdown under the noon sun.

He drove precisely two miles an hour under the speed limit.

"Sooner or later," said Fat Chance, somewhere in the gorge between North Carolina and Tennessee, Adam fighting the panic inspired by the twisting lanes of I-40, by the scars and dents along the guardrails, by the metal-mesh netting restraining the crumbling cliffs above him, "I'll have to drive."

Adam's grip tightened on the wheel.

Fat Chance must have hit the thing dead on.

It hadn't been more than ten minutes after Adam had pulled carefully to the shoulder of the westbound lane, stopping without waking Fat Chance up.

Adam had been exhausted, but he thought that maybe he could still drive. He had checked the thermos. No coffee. He had pinched his cheeks. No good. He had looked at the snoring Fat Chance. Maybe a quick nap, too? No, they were running even more behind by then, what with the long lunch and missing an exit and the lawn chair flying off and the every hundred miles or so bit of road construction that closed down one lane just to make your driving an adventure. No. No time for a nap.

Fat Chance woke right up when he understood that he could drive. "No cigars," Adam had said, buckling into the passenger seat, already sorry.

And ten minutes later, between the Duck River and the exit to Only, Tennessee, Adam had seen in the glare of the low sun a shape, black and white fur and raised tail, rushing at the right front tire at something over seventy miles an hour.

Adam thought he would die. Never, *never* had he smelled

anything like it. It was inconceivable that there could be such an odor.

"God," said Fat Chance, leaning into the air blasting through his window, "that'll knock buzzards right off their clouds."

Adam asked Fat Chance if he'd like to have a cigar. There were smells and there were smells.

"You could have zigged," he added. "You tried to hit it."

"I did not."

"You did."

"Did not."

"Yes, you did."

Fat Chance snapped his fingers. "Tomato juice," he said, and swerved toward the Only exit.

Adam stood all the way across the parking lot from the car, waiting for Fat Chance. Other people coming to the Stop 'N' Go gave the car an equally wide berth. Adam looked toward the sunset smudge, apparently smiling.

"No tomato juice," said Fat Chance, holding out two plastic bottles of ketchup and a six pack of eight-ounce cans of Spicy Hot V-8 juice.

"You're gonna have to move that car," the store manager said from behind his hand.

They drove a couple of blocks and pulled to the curb.

Fat Chance's bulking figure was red in the fading light, one hand pinching his nose, the other shaking a can of V-8. Overhead a street light hummed and flickered into dim blue life.

Adam looked around nervously. "Let's go."

"Won't take a second," said Fat Chance. He peeled back the tab of aluminized paper on the can and sprinkled the V-8 juice over the right front fender and tire as if baptizing them. Mixed with skunk was the smell of bloody Marys. Fat Chance shook another can. "Could use a hand here, Adam."

"This is stupid," Adam said, eyeing the car that slowed as it drove past.

"I tell ya, I read it that tomato juice kills skunk smell."

"This isn't tomato juice."

"Close enough."

Fat Chance finished his second can and dropped it to the curb. A neighborhood dog approached with a growl, caught the scent, changed his mind. Fat Chance tossed a can of V-8 to Adam. Adam peeled the tab. Juice flicked back onto his arm, ran under his watchband, stained the cuff of his white shirt. Adam bit his lower lip to keep his voice in.

The last juice can clanged to the pavement. Fat Chance opened a bottle of ketchup. "To-

mato ketchup," he said. "Good stickability under the fender. Give it a hard squeeze." He demonstrated. The stream of ketchup caught Adam right on the knot of his loosened tie.

It was too much. The trip, the car, the skunk, his white shirt running with ketchup and V-8 juice, and Fat Chance laughing. Another car slowed, starting faces pale in the windows as Adam took quick-kill aim and squeezed at the ample target. "A palpable hit," he shouted.

Fat Chance fired back. Adam retaliated. Escalation continued. The bottles were almost empty when the police car pulled up, blue lights strobing.

Adam leaned toward the steering wheel concentrating on two things: watching the road and ignoring Fat Chance. It was getting harder to do either because Fat Chance kept flipping open his Zippo lighter, firing it up with a flick of his thumb on the little steel wheel, snapping it shut. *Click, scritch, snap. Click scritch snap. Click...*

"Will you just stop!" Adam cried.

Scritch. "It was not my fault." *Snap.* "I shot you by accident." *Click.* "You shot me on purpose." *Scritch.*

"Okay, okay," said Adam, "it

wasn't your fault. Will you please put that thing out before you catch something on fire?"

"And the skunk?" Fat Chance held the lighter at eye level, contemplating the flame.

"Not your fault."

Snap. "So what's the problem, then, Adam?"

How could he even ask? Adam set his jaw. "I was arrested in Tennessee."

Fat Chance snorted. "You weren't even almost arrested."

"Interrogated, then."

"Real third degree stuff here, Adam. He had a report of two men killing each other, blood everywhere. He asked what the problem was. Hot lights and rubber hoses."

"But I got a ticket."

"A warning ticket."

Adam tried to communicate the humiliation. "I can never go there again."

Click. "So?"

So? thought Adam. *So?!*

"It's only Only," said Fat Chance. *Scritch.* "When can I drive?"

Adam tried to blow out the flame.

"Windproof," said Fat Chance, waving the lighter to prove it.

"Next rest stop," said Adam. *Snap.*

"This isn't our exit," Adam, squinting at the map unfolded

across his knees. The jiggling penlight made the tiny numbers hard to read. "This is 23. We need 25. Or 7 onto highway 61."

The turn signal remained on, the car remained in the exit lane.

"This is Airways Boulevard," said Adam. "We want..."

"I know what I'm doing," grumbled Fat Chance, shifting his still unlit and very soggy cigar from the right side of his mouth to the left.

Adam bent over the map, trying to make sense of the route. Memphis International Airport? Why would... oh, joy. Motels. Beds. Fat Chance wasn't going to make them Camp Out after all. His way of apologizing. Adam smiled and laid a hand delicately on the map, as if it were an icon.

The motels went by in a blur. Fat Chance turned right on Raines. Adam bent over the map.

There was a welcome center, but that was on I-55 above Raines and no access showed on the map. Of course, thought Adam. *Cheap* motels. Those near the airport would be too expensive.

Fat Chance was singing something under his breath, something about his baby leaving him. Ginger had been right, then. Fat Chance wasn't over

Ruth's walking out. Maybe this trip *was* a good idea.

Fat Chance made a right turn onto Elvis Presley Boulevard. His fingers drummed a rhythm to the tune he was singing, louder now, with feeling, so lonely, he said, he could die.

Adam frowned. The song rang a distant bell.

Fat Chance slowed the car and eased to the curb, idling beside a fence, a house visible through the trees on rising ground. Across the wrought-iron gate curved a musical staff and notes. Fat Chance was still singing.

It was late. Adam was tired. God knew he wasn't in the mood to Camp Out, but he was even less inclined to sit in the street looking at a house. Time to move on. He cleared his throat. A name floated to him. Graceland.

"Yeah?" said Fat Chance.

Adam looked back at the map. The state park was only a couple of miles away. "I was just clearing my throat," he said.

Adam expected the mosquitoes to be the worst thing about camping in the back of the Suburban. They swarmed and ate with abandon, but they didn't keep him awake. He got to sleep only after Fat Chance

ran out of Elvis songs and a late night breeze carried the skunk smell more or less away.

The next morning the park ranger made them leave before they could shower.

"I'm sorry to run you off," he said, breathing through his mouth so he sounded like he had a bad cold, "but you've already cleared out the area downwind," he gestured toward the now-abandoned campsites, "and people been complaining all night. Can I help you pack?"

Actually, he could. Adam stood in the early sun with his head about thirty degrees off center as if he were looking to his right, the result of sleeping in the Great Outdoors. The shower might have loosened his neck and shoulders some, but in any case he knew he'd be like this most of the day.

Which meant he couldn't drive. "Relax," said Fat Chance, back on the street shouting over the air horn of the eighteen wheeler he had just cut off. "A good breakfast, you'll feel better." He peeled the cellophane off a cigar with his teeth. "I feel great."

Adam angled his body so he could see Fat Chance. "No breakfast until we do something about this smell. And," he said, his voice rising to forestall protest, "I have the credit card."

And they needed gas. Fat Chance suggested they find a place that gave a free carwash with a fill-up. Adam said they needed full service to get the car checked out. Fat Chance said that any dipstick could check a dipstick. They argued for a while. The gas gauge hovered over *E*.

Then Fat Chance hit the brakes. Hank's Old Fashion I-40 Gas Station, the sign said. Headed West? Ask About Our Specials. Free Car Wash with Fill-Up. Full-Service at Self-Serve Prices.

"Truth in advertising," said Fat Chance, wheeling in. "If it's a mistake, we'll make him do it anyway."

It wasn't a mistake. It was the same friendly service Adam thought he remembered from the fifties.

"Where you boys headed?" asked the attendant, presumably Hank, as he polished the windshield.

"Arizona," Fat Chance said. "If we ever get rid of this smell so I can get breakfast so I don't pass out from hunger and kill us both."

Adam looked away, pretending to ignore him.

"Arizona, huh?" said Hank, raising the hood and leaning into the cavernous engine compartment. "I-40, or sightseeing on back roads?"

"I-40 all the way," said Fat Chance, slapping one palm off the other like a skipping rock. "Zooommm!"

Adam shuddered.

"Well, better get this water hose repaired first." He pointed into the labyrinth of metal and wire and hose. Adam and Fat Chance got out and peeked. A tiny stream of water shot from a hose, hissing and dripping to the dry pavement. "Lose your water in the desert, nothing but trouble. Tell you what. I can fix it before you finish eating." He inclined his head toward the coffee house across the street. "And since your car takes so much gas, you can run 'er through the wash till the smell comes off."

Sitting twisted in his seat so he could see to pour syrup on his hotcakes, Adam said that Hank seemed a nice guy.

"Yeah," said Fat Chance. "What's in it for him?"

Adam bit back his lecture on cynicism.

The repairs were taking longer than Adam had hoped.

"Of course they are," said Fat Chance. "He'll stiff us on the bill. I see it all the time, mechanics sticking it to insurance companies. Think I'll go let him know I'm in insurance."

Adam made him sit back down.

"You wait," said Fat Chance. "He'll stiff us."

He didn't. Even Fat Chance had to agree it was more than reasonable.

"Good as new," said Hank. "And I ran it through the wash a couple of times. Take a whiff." Adam moved downwind. Maybe it was better.

"This week's Out West Special is a free oil change and lube job at Hank's West in Tucumcari, New Mexico." He gave them a coupon with the station's name. "Right off I-40. Easy access. Can't miss it. Tell 'em Hank's East sent you."

Fat Chance held the coupon like it was bogus. Adam took it from him and thanked Hank.

"Listen," Hank said, "you want I should try to pop your neck for you?" He began cracking his knuckles, limbering his fingers and hands and forearms. Adam thanked him but declined. Fat Chance held the keys out to Adam. Adam tilted his body back to get a good look at Fat Chance's face to see if he were being mocked. Fat Chance's face was wide and innocent. "You drive," Adam said ruefully.

"Beep beep," said Fat Chance, like the Roadrunner.

The crick in Adam's neck and shoulders held his head at an angle that allowed him to see

forward only if he cut his eyes far left, a position he could not long sustain. With his eyes straight in front of him, he stared directly into the passenger door rear view mirror, watching the Arkansas countryside recede at alarming speed. He could not see the speedometer.

"How fast are we going?" he repeated.

"Okay, okay, sixty-eight," said Fat Chance, "Maybe seventy downhill."

"But we're passing everybody," said Adam.

"Sightseeing jackasses," said Fat Chance. "Rubberneckers. We got a mission." The car seemed to accelerate.

"No faster than sixty-eight," said Adam, straining to his left. "Absolutely no faster than seventy. Downhill."

"Look for license plates as I pass 'em. Make a list. Give you something to do."

In the rear view mirror Adam could see at least one car or van keeping up with them about a quarter mile back. Maybe Fat Chance was telling the truth. "No faster than seventy."

"Adam. Trust me."

They spent the night in an Oklahoma state park. Fat Chance had wanted to push on, but

Adam watched his finger trace their snail's progress across the map, and was feeling the bounces of Oklahoma's stretch of I-40 in his kidneys and lower back, and wanted to stop before dark and get a hot shower across his shoulders before bed. Fat Chance agreed under protest.

It was a lovely park on a lake, the sun reflecting a perfect disc beneath the clouds. The campsites were open, though, and close together, on their right a tent with a young couple's embarrassingly clear silhouettes, on their left a motorized monster as big as a bus, its owners looking down on them from their dining table. It was a hard choice for Adam, deciding whether to change behind the darkened glass of the Suburban or in the public showers, full of sand and hardened campers and little boys playing some loud and fast little boy game. The Suburban won, despite the gymnastics involved, and Adam's flip-flops tossed grit on his calves as he walked, canted like a crab, to the shower, hoping the warm water would relax his knotted muscles.

On his way back, his flip-flops were sucked off his feet three times in the torrents unleashed by the thunderstorm crashing around him.

Fat Chance was already asleep, more or less in the middle of the back.

Adam slept little, wedged between Fat Chance and the door, and the next morning his neck was worse. As they drove, it took an extraordinary and painful effort to make the occasional check on their speed, and even then he could only estimate where he thought the needle pointed, since the numbers were invisible. He tried timing the mileposts, seeing how long it took to pass ten, then multiplying by six and . . . no, counting how many they passed in ten minutes and multiplying *that* times six . . . no, dividing minutes into miles and multiplying by sixty . . . no.

"We're going too fast," he said again, after what he thought was a reasonable interval. Fat Chance pretended to slow down. Adam pretended to be satisfied for another ten mileposts or ten minutes, whichever he remembered to check.

Adam's crick still bent him toward the passenger window, and as long as he kept his eyes off the rushing concrete, he didn't feel too queasy. It helped to count the states when they passed cars. More and more states from farther and farther

away, fewer and fewer from home, still no Rhode Island or Alaska, or Maine, but he had a Hawaii of all things, and the Pacific coastline except for—"Oregon!" he shouted over the country music Fat Chance had on during his thirty minute radio block.

"Jeez, Adam, gimme a heart attack next time."

But as the Suburban chewed up more concrete, the view changed more rapidly, trees thinning, hills flattening, landscape spreading toward a horizon as distant as an ocean skyline. Watching the countryside, Adam even forgot to claim his half hour of classical tapes. He was deciding it was good that he was here, good to push at the edges of his own existence, to take chances, to get out of his rut, refocus on the vital, even though that might involve some discomfort, maybe even some pain. Of that one life all too little remained, and he needed to shine in use, save his hours from that eternal silence. He was almost convinced he was enjoying himself when the right rear tire blew out.

It was like a gunshot, and suddenly the car was lurching and bumping and pulling right, pulling into the eighteen wheeler that Fat Chance had been trying to get around. Adam was screaming words he

didn't admit he knew, and Fat Chance was fighting the wheel as their speed dropped, traffic coming up fast behind, guard-rail on their left, tractor-trailer on their right, now trailer, now wheels and mudskirts, *now* and Fat Chance slid in between the truck and the car on its bumper, making a space where there was none, and whipped onto the shoulder, slowing to a stop as the sound of angry horns dopplered away west.

They sat for a few minutes, breathing deeply. Wind from passing vehicles rocked the Suburban.

Fat Chance popped the hood before easing out and edging along the fender until he could get around the car. "Well," he said from his hands and knees, looking at the tire and the pavement behind it, "I don't think we got rim damage. Tire's intact. No scratch marks in the road. Where's the jack in this thing?"

It wasn't in the back. It wasn't slung under the bumper. Fat Chance found it under the hood. "Adam," he called. "Look here." His finger was pointing accusingly into the engine compartment.

Adam tilted in the general direction of the finger. "What?"

"That," said Fat Chance as if it were obvious. All Adam saw was wires and tubes and belts,

fans, containers, shapes, nothing that made any sense. "This," Fat Chance said in exasperation, leaning in and tapping one of the shapes with some of the wires going in or out of it.

Adam allowed as how he didn't know what it was.

"Anti-theft beeper. Sends out a signal. Car calls the cops right to it. If you'd told me you had this, I coulda reduced your insurance ten percent."

"How could I tell you," said Adam, struggling to maintain his decorum, "if I didn't even know."

"Maybe fifteen, since this is a pretty hot car in some places."

"What places?" asked Adam, knowing better than to ask.

"Out West," said Fat Chance.

Thank you, said Adam to himself.

Fat Chance unclamped the lug wrench and jack rod and held them out to Adam. "Don't suppose you're going to be much help here, are you?"

"I'm afraid not," he said, more or less controlling his smile. "I can hold things for you."

"Great."

Fat Chance jacked the car up, removed lug nuts, pulled off the tire. He checked the rim closely before standing up. "No damage," he said, a bit breathless. His shirt was damp. He

wiped sweat from his forehead, leaving a black streak. He looked around. "Where's the spare?"

Adam looked around. They didn't see the spare. They looked for a few seconds after they realized that it was still in the car, hoping they were wrong. They'd have to remount the tire to lower the car to open the tailgate to get the spare.

Fat Chance had just gotten the blown tire back on and tightened the lug nuts when a van pulled up behind them.

"Give you a hand?" asked one of the three men who got out.

Adam caught himself from being disappointed, since Fat Chance would now get help, an ungracious thought that made him flush. "Thank you," he said, but Fat Chance said at the same time, "No, thanks, we got it." Fat Chance sounded rude. Adam was embarrassed.

"No trouble," said the driver. "Used to be a Boy Scout, and I haven't done my good deed today."

They didn't look like Boy Scouts, Adam thought. The passengers wore their smiles like their baseball caps and sunglasses. The driver was fiftyish, had great hair, Adam thought with envy, grey and full and swept back, but he also had a goatee, a red shirt, gold chains around his neck. Dis-

turbing. And Fat Chance had just said that the Suburban was a hot car Out West, especially a big Suburban, Adam would bet, especially one with four-wheel drive. Like this one.

"Nice car," said the driver.

Fat Chance was squatting over the jack crank, easing the car back to the pavement. "Well," he said, "if y'all want to help, you could get me that spare tire there."

"I can get it," said Adam suddenly. "Thanks anyway."

"It's all you can do to lift your fork, Adam. Give him the keys so he can open the tailgate."

The driver held out an open palm, smiling. Adam didn't move.

"Adam, will you just do it? I've been in more comfortable positions, you know."

Adam dug into his pocket slowly. "I really think I can get it." The driver just stood, waiting. Adam handed him the keys. The driver tossed them to one of the others.

"Is it your back?" asked the driver, moving around Adam. "Let me pop it for you."

"No, no, that's all right, please..." Adam felt hands sliding under his arms, across his shoulders, fingers locking on either side of his head. God. He was trapped. The third guy was going to punch him and whack Fat Chance with a tire

iron and steal the car and be gone and Adam didn't even know how to activate the theft beeper and he and Fat Chance would probably lie by the side of the road until someone pulled off and ran over them and—

A blue light. A patrol car had stopped behind the van. The patrolman was walking their way.

"Ready?" said a voice beside his ear. Lord, it was too late. They'd kill the patrolman, too.

"Everything all right here?" asked the patrolman.

Adam struggled to free himself. There was a sudden tightening, a jerk, and a crack. Adam yelped.

"Flat tire," said Fat Chance, looking at Adam strangely. "'Bout done."

The second man lifted the spare over the tailgate and bounced it to the road.

"You got any warning markers?" asked the patrolman.

Fat Chance looked at Adam. "Do we?"

Adam twisted his head tentatively. Fat Chance took it for a no. "Okay, I'll sit until you finish," said the patrolman, "keep the traffic from running up on you. Be a good idea to get some markers, though."

"Better?" asked the driver of the van, standing now in front of Adam. Adam rotated his

head full left, full right. He flexed gently at the waist. He smiled and nodded.

Well, if they couldn't be any more help, they'd be on down the road, the driver said. Adam thanked them very much indeed and shook hands with each one before they drove off.

"Unusual," said the patrolman, squatting beside the blown tire as Fat Chance was finishing up. He pointed with his pen. "Sidewall blew." He leaned closer to the tire. "Been slashed. Cut partway down so it would blow on the road." He turned his mirrored glasses to Adam. Adam saw two distorted reflections of himself. "You boys piss anybody off lately?"

Adam insisted they stop at a service station to replace the tire. It cost a hundred and twenty dollars. Adam moaned.

"Kids," said Fat Chance when they were back on the road, clicking his lighter pen. "Punks. Probably in the rain last night. Get to spend the day seeing how many cars they put on the side of the road." *Scratch.*

"I'm okay," said Adam. He rotated his head to demonstrate. "You can drive later." Even as he said it he knew it would be sooner. Too little sleep the night before. He could hardly keep his eyes open. "Where are we?"

Snap. "Still in Oklahoma." He leaned toward the speedometer. "You think you might could get to sixty there, Adam?" *Click.*

"Next rest stop," said Adam, "it's yours."

A sharp turn woke Adam up, his forehead still on the cool glass. A wall of rock and dirt slid by his barely focused eyes, inches away. "Where are we?" he said, panic in his voice.

"Texas," said Fat Chance. "Ya-hoo!"

Another sudden turn, another switchback, and Adam found his now too-clearly-focused eyes on nothing but air. Far far below, it seemed there were tiny dogs in a tiny pen. No. Horses. In a corral. And that was a barn. He made some noises that weren't words.

"You say something?" said Fat Chance.

Standing by the car half an hour later, turning to survey the campsite, Adam had regained his voice but could find no words to describe the unexpected beauty. It was where Fat Chance had camped as a boy, and even though it was thirty or forty miles out of the way, Adam couldn't complain.

Fat Chance had purchased a few pieces of wood from the camp store and had gotten a small fire cracking and pop-

ping, the smell of the blue smoke sharp and warm. Fluff from cottonwood trees drifted in the breeze, floating with each filament defined against the red canyon walls rising in the distance to the darkening sky. He was Out West, just like in the movies. Sagebrush and cactus, cowboys and Indians. He smiled. Coyotes. Rattlesnakes. Scorpions. The air was suddenly cold.

They sat around the campfire with marshmallows on coat hangers while the air did grow cold. Desert air, Fat Chance said. He remembered it from when he was young. "Wait'll you see the stars." He took a bite of marshmallow with a sip of beer. "'S why I like camping out instead of motelling," he said. "In a motel you see motel walls and cheap TV's. Out here you see . . ." He waved his hand around him.

Adam followed the gesture, his eyes stopping on a pair of eyes looking back from the dark shape of some unnamed desert brush. "Marvyn," he whispered, fear in his voice.

"What?" said Fat Chance, sitting up suddenly, his voice to Adam's ears a bellow.

"*Shhh,*" said Adam, pointing.

Fat Chance squinted into the dark. Then he slowly swung the coat hanger in the direction of the eyes. A small cowboy

stepped into the firelight, plucked off the marshmallow, slid it into his mouth, and disappeared.

"Billy the Kid," said Fat Chance, and laughed and laughed, the sound echoing off the canyon walls so that a chorus of Fat Chances laughed together at Adam.

Adam looked as if he was smiling.

There was something exhilarating about the desert chill, the air cold in his nostrils, challenging somehow, making Adam more conscious of his own warmth, of being alive. And the stars . . . there were so many, they were so bright. He saw the Milky Way for the first time, really saw it, burning, cold white and silver fire across the onyx bowl of the sky, and he knew it as if he were coming home to it, felt for the first time its power in epics and folk tales. He wrapped himself in his blanket and sat in the lawn chair, head tilted to the stars, until long after the embers had faded into the night. He wished Ginger were with him, and the twins. He wanted to show them the stars.

As he lay in the Suburban he thought Camping Out might not be so bad.

He was dressed and waiting

when Fat Chance woke up. He wanted to walk to the camp store, not drive, wanted to stretch legs and see how people camped. The sun lit the far canyon wall, but they were still in shadow. Adam could see his breath. He opened his mouth wide like the twins did on cold mornings and released a slow cloud.

They saw tents and trailers and motor homes, campers living out of two door subcompacts and campers taking pictures through blinds in forty foot houses on wheels. Adam wasn't sure he could handle tent life, only a pad between him and the rocky ground, and the trailers looked too big and seemed too much like home. But the pop-ups, the not quite tents and not quite trailers—you'd still be roughing it, but softly. He asked Fat Chance if the Suburban could pull one. Fat Chance snorted. "It would think it was a flea."

Maybe they could do this. Maybe they could. He felt better than he had in weeks.

At the camp store Adam treated them to coffee and hot-cakes and bought postcards, one of every different view of the canyon he could find. While they ate, he chose one for Ginger and the twins, drawing an arrow on the front more or less to their campsite, and filled the

message square with cramped and mostly illegible descriptions. "Having a wonderful time," he closed, "and do wish you were here." Fat Chance addressed a card to Ruth. He drew two stick figures standing on the rim of the canyon's cliffs. In the sky above them he wrote "Postcard from the Ledge." At the base of the cliff he drew an arrow. "Wish you were HERE." Adam couldn't convince him not to send it.

Fat Chance bought himself a straw cowboy hat on the way out of the store. It was a half size too small and sat high on his head. Normally Adam would have been mortified, but today, well, he felt—possible. He tested his back and his neck as they walked to the campsite. They weren't too bad. He was tougher than he thought, younger. Age was a state of mind after all, maybe, to a certain extent. Above the far canyon wall it was raining, clouds purple, lightning crinkling soundlessly, double rainbows visible, pot-of-gold to pot-of-gold. All experience was such an arch. His step was, he had to admit, bouncy.

As they approached the campsite, Adam spotted Billy the Kid at his post beside what Adam liked to think was sagebrush. Billy was in his red cowboy hat, six guns at his side.

Fat Chance spread his feet and raised his hands above imaginary .44's. Billy beat him to the draw. Fat Chance died loudly and slowly, staggering around, never quite falling, managing to make it to the tailgate where he sat and finally expired. The tailgate wasn't supposed to be open. The spare tire was gone.

That did it for camping as far as Adam was concerned. Couldn't even eat breakfast without something getting stolen, all those people around, nobody saw anything, except Billy. Billy saw a man in a red car. Then he said it was a man in a red truck. Then he said it was a man in an orange car. "Fix it," said Billy. "Broken."

The ranger said he was sorry but there was not much he could do. Chances were they were long gone. He'd be glad to drive them around and look for a red or orange car or truck, but there were, let's see, two hundred and seventy-two campsites and they were about eighty percent full . . .

Adam looked at his watch. They were already behind schedule. They could still make Albuquerque before dark if they left soon, but they really needed to be farther than that to make Flagstaff in time to register for the conference the next day, which meant they

couldn't count on making the next state park, which meant a motel somewhere, which meant money up in smoke, and another hundred for another spare tire . . . He looked at Fat Chance in the little cowboy hat. Fat Chance shrugged.

"Where," said Adam to the ranger so that he wouldn't say to Fat Chance what he was thinking, "is the nearest place to purchase a tire?"

"Amarillo," said the ranger. "Twenty-five miles."

Adam couldn't face the idea of traveling that far without a spare.

The ranger drove them around the campsite in his four by four. It took a couple of hours. They would have had a good tour of the canyon if they hadn't been looking for the red or orange car or truck, which was nowhere to be found. They were really behind schedule now.

Nothing to do but go on. Adam let Fat Chance drive, much to Fat Chance's surprise. But Adam didn't trust himself behind the wheel right then, and he wasn't particularly anxious to negotiate that series of switchbacks that would raise them out of this canyon full of rustlers and varmints. It made him dizzy just to look down.

"Wow, look at that," said Fat Chance, pointing across

Adam's face, the car inching toward the unguarded edge.

"Watch the road!" Adam yelled.

Fat Chance was laughing. Fat Chance was laughing at him.

"Marvyn." His tone, he hoped, was one of warning, like a sidewinder's rattle, if sidewinders had rattles.

"Can't look, can you?" said Fat Chance.

Adam didn't deign to respond. He simply turned his head casually toward the open air at his right and let gravity pull his eyes down, down, god that was a long way down, the road switching back and forth below him, the dog pen and toy houses beyond again. Maybe he could see the red or orange car or truck from up here, he thought, but he couldn't. The only cars visible were those almost directly below, and it wasn't there. But was that the . . .

Switchback. Adam found himself looking at the cliff wall sliding by with surprising speed. He wanted to ask Fat Chance if he could see a black van below them, but he didn't want to encourage Fat Chance's eyes to wander.

"Hey," said Fat Chance. "I think that's that black van down there."

"Watch the road."

"It had that funny TV antenna." They switchbacked again. "See it?"

"No . . . wait. There it is." Yes. The same antenna. The same van. He could see a face looking up at him, disappearing when it saw his face looking down. Maybe. "Marvyn. This isn't a coincidence."

Fat Chance considered. "No. Stop for two girls with a flat, yeah, maybe you expect that. But why for two guys? You didn't flag them down, did you?"

"No, I didn't flag them down . . ."

"I mean, you did look kind of helpless standing there all stiff and twisted."

"I did *not* flag them down."

"But they wouldn't need the spare. We're truck tires. They're probably passenger car. Anyway, the kid said orange or brown car or truck."

"Orange or red."

"Whatever. Just don't blame me."

"Who said anything about blame? Did I say anything about blame?"

"You didn't need to. You're wearing your professor tone. I ain't your student."

Praise god, Adam said to himself.

They turned up the last switchback.

Adam's eyes narrowed, and

he spoke slowly as if trying to read the words out of the bright blue sky.

"The tire was cut. The patrolman said so. What if they're the ones who cut it?"

"Why would they . . ."

"So we would stop. So they could . . ." He trailed off.

"They'd have to be at the camp in Oklahoma then. They'd have to be following us from there."

"They might have done it again," said Adam suddenly. "We've got to check the tires, Marvyn."

They reached the rim and the gatehouse parking lot. The van was still ascending out of sight. Fat Chance whipped into a space between two travel trailers and killed the engine. "Scrunch down," he said.

Adam scrunched. Fat Chance angled the mirror so he could see from his position. Adam could barely see in the door mirror. The van rolled by without slowing.

"Was it them?" Adam said.

"Don't know. Couldn't see in the windows. Sure looked like it, though."

They waited five minutes scrunched. Adam felt his neck begin to shift into the locked position. "Is it safe?"

Fat Chance sat up. "I'll check us out of here. You check the tires."

As far as Adam could see, the tires were fine. He even felt around the far sides. His fingers came away dusty and blackened.

They headed north to Amarillo. At home, from the highway they would have seen hills or open land only to the tree-line. Here they could see Amarillo rising across the plains, maybe still ten miles away. The road was straight as a gunshot.

Adam tried to relax, though not having a spare made him feel naked. But it would be all right. They were on the road again. At Amarillo they'd get their spare, get back on 40 West, and go.

But he couldn't stop thinking about the van. It must have been after the car itself. Cut the tire so it went out on the road, follow along, offer to help, and just drive off with both cars. He imagined himself and Fat Chance without a car, an older man and a fat guy in a little cowboy hat trying to flag down cars streaking by on I-40. He knew he wouldn't have stopped for such a pair.

He asked Fat Chance if he thought they were after the car.

Fat Chance scoffed. Follow them across three states for a car? That was stupid. They were stupid. The whole thing

was stupid. It was just a van.

"Good," Adam said finally. "Let's find a store, spend another hundred dollars on another tire . . ."

"More," said Fat Chance, eyes still on the mirror. "They stole the tire and the wheel. You need a wheel, too. Couple of hundred easy. Maybe more."

When Adam got really mad, a pulse in his right eye beat strongly enough for him to see. The city of Amarillo developed a definite throb.

"What do you mean, *I* need a wheel, too? *We* need a wheel, too. *We*. I see two of us."

"Hey," said Fat Chance. "It's your trip. I'm just here to help you drive."

It was noon when they got into Amarillo. It was half past four when they got out.

It took four tries to find a tire and wheel, two tries before lunch, two after. And as Fat Chance had predicted, it cost over two hundred dollars. Well over.

Then they got lost. They could see I-40 easily enough, cutting right through the heart of the city, but they couldn't find a way to get on. They'd be in the wrong lane for the right access ramp or the right lane for the wrong access ramp, or turned around and somehow heading away from the interstate. Fat Chance insisted he

knew what he was doing, blaming Adam's directions, even though Adam wasn't giving any. Adam sulked, thinking he was catching glimpses of black vans hovering at the edge of sight in the mirror. The street filled around them with rush hour traffic.

"Follow that doughnut truck," said Adam at a stoplight. The truck was turning into their lane from a side street.

"Right," said Fat Chance, signaling a left turn.

"Just do it," said Adam, "and I'll be quiet."

"Deal."

The doughnut truck led them straight to I-40 West.

Adam raised his chin in triumph.

"All right," said Fat Chance, "on the road again."

"At last," agreed Adam. They ought to be able to go straight through to Albuquerque, two hundred eighty-three miles from Amarillo, four and a half hours, barring flat tires or road construction. The downside was that they were way behind schedule. The upside was a motel. Not the motel *per se*, but the bath and the double bed. Traffic was bad now, but that should thin soon, and they could drive straight through. Zoom.

Fat Chance tapped on the gas

gauge. "I thought you told them to fill it up."

"I thought *you* told them."

"I think they're back."

"You didn't fill it up, did you? How much is left?"

Fat Chance was watching the mirror. "See what you think."

"So now we . . . who's back?" But he knew who Fat Chance meant. In his mirror he saw a black van.

"You said it was any van," said Adam.

"Could be I was wrong," said Fat Chance.

"I thought I saw them in Amarillo."

"Me too."

"What do they want? It can't be the car."

"I don't know. But I'd rather not stop anyplace lonely if you get my drift."

Adam told himself to stay calm. "How much gasoline is left?"

Fat Chance tapped the gauge again. "Half of a quarter of a tank. Maybe less. What's the next big town?"

Adam bent over the map. "Tucumcari."

Something clicked.

"If they're not after the car," said Adam, "it's something *in* the car. Something in the tire. Something valuable."

"Hank," said Fat Chance. "Drugs. Find somebody going

cross country, load drugs into the spare, unload at Hank's West. They can't get caught because we run the drugs."

"It would never work," Adam protested.

Fat Chance looked in the mirror. "It has so far."

Adam looked into the mirror. "Something must have gone wrong, then," he said quietly. "They want it now."

"It must be worth a bundle." Fat Chance cleared his throat. "How far can we get on a half of a quarter of a tank?"

"Oh lord," said Adam. "Oh lord." He stared into the side mirror but could see nothing. "Let's give them the tire."

"Just stop and say 'here'?"

Fat Chance's tone told Adam that "well, yes," would be the wrong answer. "Well," he said, "maybe not. But maybe. I mean, what would they do?"

"Before or after they killed us?"

"Why do you say things like that? I hate it when you say things like that."

"I knew you blamed me," Fat Chance said.

Adam ignored him. "So what do we do?"

"Keep moving," said Fat Chance. "Pretend we don't know anything."

"How do we do that?" Adam snapped.

"Act casual."

Adam opened his mouth and closed it. He crossed his arms. He couldn't think of anything better to suggest. "So we're trapped."

Fat Chance thought for a minute. "Yeah," he said.

"Trapped on a four lane interstate highway. Trapped with cars and people all around us. Trapped at seventy miles an hour."

Fat Chance had an index finger in his right ear.

"I'm not yelling," Adam yelled.

"My mistake," said Fat Chance.

Adam turned his face toward the mirror again.

They sped down I-40 in their own little knot of traffic, the sun falling before them. The Texas Panhandle streaked by, beginning to roll, revealing gulleys and draws and canyons and mesas. Adam was aware only of concrete and jiggling images in the mirror. He heard the cellophane crinkle off a cigar, heard the click and scritch of Fat Chance's lighter, the lips smacking as Fat Chance sucked the cigar to life, the snap of the lighter closing, the sudden change in pressure as Fat Chance cracked his vent window. He didn't care. Let him smoke. Let him do anything he pleased, drink beer, drive eighty, drive naked.

Across the median in the east-bound lane, a state trooper slid by. Adam sat up. "I want to get arrested."

Fat Chance looked at him without moving his head.

"We look for a highway patrolman," said Adam. "We blow our horn, flash our lights, maybe even litter . . .

"Litter?"

"... if we have to. Run into his car a little."

"Shoot ketchup on each other."

"Whatever it takes. Then we're safe. Then we can explain."

"Sure. 'Yes, Your Honor, we knew we had a tire full of cocaine. No, Your Honor, we didn't put it there. We think it was somebody from the Black Van. Not the orange or red car or truck which was after our tire, too, but got the wrong tire.' Convincing."

"I'll take that chance."

Fat Chance flicked a cylinder of cigar ash at the vent. "I been looking already. Nothing yet."

Now that he had a purpose, a hope, Adam sat up and concentrated on the cars westbound and eastbound. They crossed into New Mexico. The land kept changing subtly, beautifully, rising now, but Adam rode shielding his eyes from the hanging sun, looking for the highway patrol. He saw nothing.

Mile after mile of highway and cars and pickups and campers and buses and motorcycles and tractor-trailers, but no highway patrol.

And vans. He saw vans. Lots of vans, some of them black.

The sun disappeared behind far clouds that might have been hovering over mountain peaks barely tipping the horizon. Headlights came on here and there. Adam saw another east-bound black van.

"Are they still back there?" he said.

"Far as I know," said Fat Chance, alternating his gaze between highway and mirror.

"But you don't see them."

"Not right now."

The car started accelerating. "What are you doing?" said Adam.

Fat Chance's voice changed. "Looking for a cop."

They were up to seventy-five. The acceleration continued. Adam checked his seatbelt. Fat Chance sat on the horn as he rounded a pickup. It made Adam jump.

"Don't do that," said Adam.

Fat Chance kept blowing. "Maybe they'll get mad and call the cops."

They were up to eighty. Cars in the right lane fell behind. Adam's grip tightened on his armrests. "Are they back there?"

"Somebody is. More than one set of headlights. Where's a cop? I can't even buy a ticket."

They were up to eighty-five. That was as high as the speedometer registered. Adam could feel the acceleration continue.

Suddenly it all seemed crazy. They could kill themselves and somebody else, and for nothing. He'd seen a dozen black vans eastbound. They might have been running from a different van every fifty miles. "This is stupid," he said. Fat Chance's fingers were white on the wheel. "Slow down. Slow down. Marvyn, they're not after us. Nobody is after us."

Fat Chance opened and closed his fingers and looked at Adam, eyes wide. The car began slowing. Fat Chance took a deep breath. "Probably not." At sixty-five they drifted back into the right lane. "Let's find out. Take the next exit. See if they follow."

It was a question. It made sense. Adam nodded.

"How far?"

Adam opened the map. "What if he exits with us?"

Fat Chance shrugged. "Keep going, I guess. Where the hell are all the cops?"

"About three miles," Adam said.

A mile before the exit Fat Chance accelerated again, passing the tractor-trailer

whose bumper they'd been on, timing it so that he reentered the right lane only a few hundred feet before the exit. As soon as he was in front of the truck, he killed his lights and angled for the exit ramp, not using the brake but letting gravity and friction slow the car, then using the parking brake to stop completely so that they'd show no brake lights. Fat Chance turned to Adam, his very posture revealing his pride in the maneuver.

"Why," said Adam with forced patience, "did you do that?"

"Sort of like setting a pick in basketball," said Fat Chance. "The truck gave us cover. You ought to watch a little more ESPN and less of that A&E stuff there, Adam."

"The point," said Adam, "was for him to see us. If he didn't see us, how do we know he's after us?" Adam's voice was rising. He couldn't seem to control it. He didn't much care. "And if we don't know if he's after us, what do we do now?"

"But—"

Adam opened his door. "I'm driving. Get out so we can see if they go by." He slammed the door shut before Fat Chance could answer.

They stood by the car watching in silence. It was still light enough to make out shapes,

and once traffic was beyond them, they could see definite colors in the headlights behind. They saw vans, but nothing black.

"We might have missed him while we were in the car," said Adam. "Or he might have missed us. You drove brilliantly."

Fat Chance didn't respond.

"Now what? Go forward? He may be out there still. Go back? I have a paper to deliver."

"I thought you didn't want..."

"Well, I do now," Adam snapped. "I didn't go through all this just to turn around and go back. I..." He stopped. The right side of Fat Chance's face was growing lighter. A pair of headlights had separated from the line of traffic flowing west and was drifting up the ramp towards them.

"Get in the car," said Fat Chance.

It was a van, but in the dimness and silhouetted against the stream of headlights, it could have been any color.

Fat Chance started the engine but kept his foot off the brake pedal and didn't cut on the headlights.

"Let's go," said Adam.

"Wait a second."

"Let's go!"

"Let's be sure," said Fat Chance, the stripe of light

across his eyes from the rear view mirror brightening.

The van stopped twenty feet behind them. It looked dark. It sat.

"No turn signal," said Fat Chance. "No horn."

They heard the panel slide open. Three shapes emerged and stood by the van.

"Let's go," Adam whispered.

Fat Chance shifted the transmission into reverse. The backup lights came on. The lights showed the black van and the three men clearly, the same three men they had seen by the side of the road before, only this time they held guns and they were walking toward them.

Fat Chance floored it. The tires spun for a moment, the men hesitating, then the tires bit and the Suburban shot backwards, scattering the men and smashing into the front end of the van. The van lurched backwards and its open passenger door knocked down one of the men.

Fat Chance dropped the car into drive and floored it again. The Suburban leapt forward. Adam saw an arm come up. "Look out!"

The tailgate window disappeared and a little hole in a starburst appeared in the middle of the windshield. Fat Chance put the Suburban into

mighty swerves. Adam didn't even have a seatbelt on.

"Can they run?" yelled Fat Chance.

Adam craned to see. The van wasn't moving yet. "No . . . yes. They're coming. They lost a headlight."

Fat Chance flew onto I-40, cutting off a station wagon.

Adam fumbled with his seatbelt. "Why do they want to kill us?" he yelled over the noise pouring in through the back window. Exhaust was being sucked in, too. He lowered his window for breathable air. "Why do they want to kill us?"

"They know we know," said Fat Chance. "Now we're dangerous."

"But we *don't* know," Adam protested.

"I know," said Fat Chance.

In the mirror, Adam saw a popeye in the left lane. "Here they come."

Fat Chance put it on the floor. The single headlight was lane-hopping, clearly gaining.

"Come on, baby," said Adam, stroking the dashboard. "Come on."

"We're built for power, not speed," said Fat Chance, changing lanes, whipping around a BMW on the inside, changing back, shooting a bird at the BMW's high beams in the mirror.

The popeye was still gaining.

They could go no faster. They were low on gas. Eventually the van would catch them. Adam thought of Hector and Achilles around the walls of Troy.

Ahead they saw a long line of yellow lights flashing randomly. Adam thought cops at first, with a cold and fierce joy, but then the sign loomed and zipped past, Road Construction, Left Lane Closed, One Mile. Ahead brake lights were coming on and cars were signaling toward the right lane. Fat Chance gave his Texas yell and kicked the Suburban into passing gear.

"The lane's going to close," Adam shouted.

Fat Chance roared up the left lane, passing car after car, barely missing some. Ahead Adam could see the sawhorses holding the flashing lights.

At the last second, it seemed to Adam, Fat Chance slowed and bulled his way into the right lane, ignoring the constant horn from the outraged car he cut off. Adam sank low in his seat so as not to be seen. Fat Chance was grinning. "Wanted to get as far ahead as we could. Now we're trapped where we are, and so is he. Like the caution flag in stock car racing."

They were wedged in traffic and slowing. The crowd made

Adam feel safer. He turned to look behind them. At the sight of his face in its headlights the car behind started honking again. Adam gave a sheepish smile and an elaborate shrug to show he was sorry. In the distance he thought he saw flashing yellow lights arc through the air.

He looked at the left lane beside them on the other side of the barrier of cones and sawhorses. New blacktop. They were repaving. It wasn't complete up the road, maybe, and lines hadn't been painted yet, but it was solid.

"They're coming," he said.

Fat Chance checked the side mirror. "Damn."

The right lane was down to forty, down to thirty-five. The van caught them quickly. On the other side of the cones, it matched their speed. The man in the passenger seat waved and grinned. It was the man with grey hair. He had what might have been blood on the side of his face. He was mouthing something, pointing at Fat Chance. You're mine, he was saying.

The panel door slid open. No light came on in the van, but Adam could see a man in the dark aiming a pistol at the left front tire. "Watch it!" he yelled.

There was a spark of light in the van, and the Suburban's

left front wheel rang with an impact.

Fat Chance whipped right, getting onto the shoulder. The shoulder was pocky and gravelly. Fat Chance struggled with the steering. To their left, beyond the line of traffic between them, the van matched their speed. Fat Chance accelerated. It accelerated.

Over the roofs of the cars they were passing, Greyhair was yelling something. Stop, he was yelling.

"They can't see our tires to shoot 'em," said Fat Chance.

Adam saw another little flash of light at the same time that the backmost left window turned into a million shards and disappeared.

"You're crazy," Fat Chance shouted.

Greyhair nodded and winked and pointed to his temple.

Fat Chance kicked into passing gear again, controlling the fishtail and then slowing beside an eighteen wheeler, using it as a rolling barrier.

"Got 'em," he said.

"This can't go on forever," said Adam.

Fat Chance eased forward to peek through the gap between the tractor and trailer. They couldn't see the van. But as they watched, the left rear outside wheel of the tractor began disintegrating.

"They're shooting out his tires," said Adam.

The big rig began decelerating and drifting toward the shoulder. Fat Chance floored it again, clearing the tractor just before it would have mashed them into the guardrail. In the van, the passenger waved. The middle window of the Suburban exploded. The driver's window would be next.

Adam squinted into the distance. "Go faster," he yelled. He could see traffic fanning out into two lanes ahead. He could just make out the heavy paving equipment at the construction's end. "Faster."

The van saw the equipment, too, but too late. It hit the brakes, tires smoking, went into a skid, and, Adam was sure, collided with something big and heavy. He prayed the collision had been hard enough.

Fat Chance wrenched the Suburban back into traffic. Adam stared until the lights at the construction site blended into one stream, too far to resolve. No popeye. He sank into his seat and smiled. Against all odds, Hector had won.

"Where are we?" said Fat Chance.

Adam read the map with the enlightenment, squinting into the light for a mile marker. His best guess was about ten miles from Tucumcari.

"Good, 'cause we're running on fumes."

"Just not Hank's West."

A green sign showed gas and food at the next exit, two miles up. They slowed to exit, the station visible just off the interstate. It was Hank's West. Fat Chance switched off the turn signal and accelerated on down I-40. They cheered.

"Just hope we have enough to make it to the next exit," said Fat Chance.

They almost did. They drifted sputtering up the exit toward a big station with eight or ten islands, all but one empty, lit bright by banks of fluorescents. They pushed the car the last two hundred yards to the near pumps, Fat Chance steering at the driver's door, Adam straining at the tailgate. They pushed the Suburban to the far side of the pump island to hide it from the highway, but it was unlikely they could be seen even if the black van were still looking. The shattered glass in the Suburban reflected the light like hundreds of diamonds.

Adam sagged against the car, breathing hard, one eye still cocked toward I-40 in the distance.

Fat Chance opened the gas tank and stuck in the nozzle. They tried to signal the attendant to cut on their pump. "Go

wake that guy up," said Fat Chance. "And call the cops while you're at it."

The attendant was in a thick glass booth in the middle of the complex. Adam had to rap on the glass with a quarter to get his attention. He could feel the rock music vibrating through the coin.

The kid leaned toward the speaker grille.

"Yeah?"

Adam wanted to fill it up. He gestured toward the Suburban.

"Pump number?"

Adam didn't know. The kid muttered something under his breath, head bobbing with the beat of the thunderous drum. Adam called to Fat Chance for the number. Five. "Five," he said. The kid had his eyes closed, lost in the music. Adam beat on the window and held up five fingers.

"Pay in advance."

Adam slid two twenties under the glass. The kid made gimme motions with his fingers. "More. Big car."

The tank held thirty-two gallons. Gas was a dollar fifteen. "It won't take more than this," Adam shouted. "It can't."

The kid pushed his twenties back under the glass. "You want gas or you don't," he said, as if it were of no concern to him.

Adam slid in three twenties.

"Could I use your phone. I need to call . . ."

"What?"

"I need to use your phone."

"No way, pops. Company policy."

"I need to call the police."

The kid ignored him.

"Will you call the police for me?"

The kid looked him in the eye. "What part of *no* don't you understand?" He cranked up his music.

"What's the problem here?" said Fat Chance, looming up.

"Is there a pay phone I can use?" Adam said into the speaker grille.

Fat Chance pushed him aside. "Hey," he said. "Hey, twerp!" he shouted. The kid turned and glared. "Good. Now why don't you stop being a smartass and cut on pump number five?"

The kid smirked. "It is on."

Fat Chance bit the end off a cigar and spat it to his left. "Check again, Einstein."

The kid looked at his boards. He reached over and flipped a switch. The tips of his ears turned red.

Fat Chance clicked and scratched his lighter and fired up his cigar. He blew a thunderhead of smoke at the fluorescent lights. The breeze caught it and whipped it away. "Pay phone. Where?"

The kid hesitated, his eyes burning. Then he pointed to the far end of the central row of pumps. Fat Chance blew a cloud of smoke at the glass. "Thanks a million."

Adam and Fat Chance found three phones in little half-shell booths. All three were out of order. "Hey, twerp," shouted Fat Chance, pounding on the glass with his fist, "your phones are broke."

The kid was smiling. "Hey, fatso. I know."

"How about calling the cops for us."

"No can do. So sorry."

"Come on, Marvyn," said Adam, pulling at him.

"Hey, fatso," said the kid. "No smoking."

Fat Chance stopped moving. He looked at the cigar in his hand as if it were his last. He put it in his lips. He puffed and puffed, inhaling until an inch of red coal burned at the end. Then he put his mouth to the speaker grate and blew a fog of smoke into the tiny booth, and blew, and still blew. The kid waved his hand impotently in front of his face. When he had emptied his lungs, Fat Chance snapped the glowing cigar under the glass into the booth. "Finish it for me."

The kid was twitching with rage. He reached over and cut off the pump.

Fat Chance pointed to the switch. "Cut that back on." A customer came to the other side of the booth. The kid turned his back on Fat Chance while he dealt with him, all politeness. The customer eyed Adam and Fat Chance curiously through two walls of glass. "Come again, sir," the kid said as the customer turned away. The kid looked at Fat Chance and smiled.

Fat Chance started to say something. Adam didn't know what it was going to be, but he knew it could not possibly help. Pushing Fat Chance toward the car proved only a little more difficult than pushing the car to the pump. "I guess you showed him," Adam said at the car. "Now, just stay here and be quiet."

Adam convinced the kid to cut on the pump. Adam was polite, apologetic, deferential, obsequious by turns, and finally told the kid that he could keep the change from the sixty dollars. The kid snapped the pump on. He never said a word.

Fat Chance was sulking in the car, his arms crossed. "I'll pump," said Adam. "Maybe you could check the oil?" Fat Chance didn't acknowledge that he had heard.

Wonderful, Adam thought. The perfect ending to a perfect trip. He inserted the nozzle and

leaned against the car with its windows shot out and its spare tire stolen and how were they supposed to sleep now? He squeezed the handle and the nozzle jumped in his hand. They should just turn around and drive until they got home, just tank up on coffee and head east, switching off the driving, stopping only for food or restrooms or gas or more coffee. Get home to Ginger, get the car to Earl, lord, Earl would kill him when he saw the Suburban. And his department head, what would he say if Adam missed the conference? Didn't matter. Just get home.

The hood opened, making Adam jump. "Down a quart," said Fat Chance. "You want to deal with the twerp or ... Adam. Look at this."

Fat Chance's voice sounded urgent. Adam released the nozzle handle. Fat Chance was pointing under the hood, pointing at the antitheft alarm. "Earl didn't put that in. Hank did. That's how they followed us. Must use their own frequency or something." Fat Chance began pulling at wires. "Fill 'er up and let's get out of here."

Adam began pumping, hearing as he did the sound of an engine coming their way, turning into the station. It pulled to their far side, between them and the twerp. Adam didn't

dare to look up. He didn't dare not to. A quick glance, then. Ah, thank God, not a van, not black. It was red or orange. It was a car or a truck.

The driver got out. It was Hank. He had a gun. He wasn't happy.

"Where is it?" he snarled.

Adam raised his hands.

"Come out here now," Hank said to Fat Chance behind the hood, "or I shoot your father."

Nobody would hear, Adam realized. On the highway, as far as he could tell, nobody had heard, nobody had seen. It would be no different here, the booth blocked, the road empty. Only I-40 hummed with traffic, half a mile away.

Fat Chance slammed the hood down and came around the car.

"Where is it?" Hank repeated.

"Right rear," said Fat Chance, nodding.

"You're kidding, right? You better not be kidding."

"Your buddies slashed our tire. We put on the spare. You got our new spare. Empty right?"

Hank motioned with his gun. "Get it off."

"Here?"

Hank looked around. "No. Too public." He pointed the gun at Fat Chance. "You drive. Your father comes with me

You get smart, he gets dead. We're going up this two lane a ways and change tires."

Adam raised the gas nozzle. "We're out of gas."

The gun pointed back at Adam. "Then fill it, idiot." His eyes narrowed. "What buddies?" he said.

Fat Chance shrugged. "One's got grey hair, goatee, gold chains. Drives a black van."

Even in the blue light Adam could see Hank go pale.

"That's it," said Hank. "Let's go."

"Go where, Hank?" said a voice, and from behind Hank's Bronco, pistol in his fist, walked Greyhair. Blood had dried down the side of his face. He waved into the darkness beyond the reach of the fluorescents, and the black van itself took shape from the night, dented, steaming, both headlights gone, but running. It angled in front of Hank's car. Two men got out. One had a hand tucked inside a shirt. Both had guns.

"Give me your gun, Hank," said Greyhair.

Hank didn't move.

"Fine," said the driver. "Make all my choices easy."

Hank slowly handed him the gun. Greyhair stuck it in his belt. Then he slapped the back of Hank's head with an open palm. "We found Freddy. He

didn't say much, but we kind of figured he didn't screw us out of the money and the dope. That left you. We figured the usual mules when you decided to run." He slapped Hank's head again. Hank hunched against the blows as if he was familiar with them.

"Let's get that tire and go," said Hurtwrist.

Greyhair shook his head. "We need the mules' car. Hell, we need your car, too, Hank. Why don't we work a trade? Why don't you and your mules get in the van and we'll work out the details." He touched the blood on the side of his face. "I got some payback coming personal, too." He pushed Hank toward the van. "Get in. You too." He pointed his gun at Adam.

Adam was frozen. If they got in the van, they'd never come out alive, he was certain of it. He'd rather they shoot him here and be done with it and maybe they'd get caught, except that there was nobody to catch them but the twerp in the booth, who wouldn't see anything even if they weren't blocked by the van and the Bronco...

"I said move it."

The pistol in the driver's hand looked huge and he looked as deadly as the villain on Main Street at high noon, and the nozzle in Adam's right

hand felt like a pistol. Show-down. Adam squeezed the handle.

Gasoline arced toward Greyhair, blasted him right in the chest, splashed around him. He covered his eyes with a crooked arm and staggered back.

It had just been a quick squeeze, a direct hit. Adam stood stunned at his success.

Greyhair raised his pistol. "You son of a . . ."

His buddies shouted that he might set himself on fire. Greyhair looked at them, uncertain.

"Hose 'em, Adam," said Fat Chance, and Adam squeezed and held the handle down, blasting Hank and Greyhair and the van and the Bronco and the other two men. He stopped.

The air reeked. Gasoline stained the pavement and ran in narrow, slow streams behind the Suburban, toward Adam.

"You son of a bitch," said Greyhair, reaching into the van for a tire iron and taking a step towards him. Adam squeezed again. Nothing happened. The twerp had cut off the pump. Greyhair took another step.

Fat Chance moved between them. In the silence Adam heard a familiar *click*. He hunched his shoulders against the coming sound. He saw Brunhilde burning. Not fire again, please not fire.

Scratch.

There was no explosion. Fat Chance stood, arm raised high, lighter aloft, flame rushing in the breeze. "The old Statue of Liberty play," he said. A rivulet of gasoline reached his shoe, gathered into a tiny pool, ran around his foot. Greyhair took another step forward. "Go ahead," said Fat Chance. "Make your day." Greyhair stopped. "Now, you boys don't move unless you want to play catch the Zippo. Adam, you get into the car. We're leaving."

Adam dropped the nozzle and got behind the wheel. The gas had run behind the Suburban and was downwind, but he was still afraid. "Should I start it?" he called.

"We'll just follow," said Greyhair. "We'll be on your tail before you get up to speed. You're dead men."

"Go ahead," called Fat Chance to Adam.

Adam closed his eyes and turned the key. The engine roared to life. Nothing else did.

"Pull up a few feet."

Adam pulled up and opened the passenger door.

"We disabled the beeper," Fat Chance said.

"We don't need it," said Greyhair. "You can't outrun us."

Fat Chance simply stood. Adam stood at the driver's side, door open. "Come on, Marvyn,"

he said. He could hear the flame in the wind.

"How much we talking here?" said Fat Chance.

"Half a million cash," said Greyhair. "Half a million horse."

"Serious money," said Fat Chance.

"Serious as a heart attack," said Greyhair. The others stood beside him, holding Hank.

Fat Chance nodded. "You convinced me," said Fat Chance. "You're serious. We can't outrun you. So when I count to three, I'm going to drop this lighter. If you run fast, you might get clear."

"Marvyn!" shouted Adam.

"One," said Fat Chance.

The four men stood frozen, eyes wide.

"Two," said Fat Chance.

Three of the men broke and ran. Greyhair stood his ground, his tire iron raised. The second Fat Chance should have counted came and went.

"Two and a half," said Fat Chance.

The driver smiled. "I knew it," he said, advancing. "You can't do it."

"I mean it," said Fat Chance, retreating a step.

"I'm sure you do," said the driver.

Fat Chance extended the lighter toward Greyhair. If Greyhair swung, he'd knock the

lighter into the gasoline. "Last chance," said Fat Chance. Greyhair hesitated, deciding. His buddies were edging around behind Fat Chance. Hank was still running into the dark.

Greyhair dropped the tire iron and raised his pistol. "Your Zippo didn't light it. I'm willing to bet this won't, either. You willing to bet that? If I were you, I'd close it down right now."

"Shoot, then," said Fat Chance. "Or run and see if I can throw it on you. But do something soon, because it's beginning to burn my fingers and I might have to let it go. Two and three quarters."

They had stopped moving. Adam thought he was looking at a photograph.

"You forgot your cigar, fatso," growled the twerp, rounding the van, "and I've called the sheriff—whups."

Greyhair grabbed him by the hair and pulled him into a headlock, gun at his temple. He began advancing on Fat Chance again. "Now what, fat boy? Gonna toast this kid? You wouldn't dare."

Fat Chance looked at the twerp's head being squeezed beneath Greyhair's arm, eyes bulging, arms flailing. He smiled. "Three," Fat Chance said, and tossed the lighter high into the air.

It arced slowly toward the fluorescents, flame fluttering, and started back down.

By the time it hit the pavement, the Suburban, Fat Chance, the twerp, and Grey-hair were accelerating in different directions. Even over the Suburban's engine as he sped away, Adam could hear the soft *whump* of the gasoline igniting.

By the time Adam stopped in the dirt beyond the station, Fat Chance was almost to him, tire iron in hand.

By the time the gas tanks of the van and the Bronco ruptured, fire trucks and deputies were rolling in. The twerp led the deputies to Adam and Fat Chance standing guard over the Suburban, headlights shining into the darkness of the empty fields. He pointed a trembling finger at Fat Chance. "He tried to kill me," he said, voice quivering.

"I saved your life, worm,"

said Fat Chance. The twerp made a show of trying to go for Fat Chance. The deputies held him back.

"What happened here?" the ranking deputy asked.

"Well," Fat Chance began, but Adam politely cut him off, realizing that the story would need a patient and careful telling of which Fat Chance was incapable. He told it patiently and carefully, and as he told it, he heard a tale of two heroes on an epic journey, not moving earth and heaven, perhaps, but enjoying and suffering greatly, taking the thunder and the sunshine, drinking the delight of battle, doing some work of noble note, and understanding at last journey as destination. After he finished, the deputies put them under arrest.

Handcuffed in the back of the deputy's car, Fat Chance sang "Jailhouse Rock." Handcuffed beside him, Adam looked as if he were smiling.

(continued from page 3)

on [a] series that won [the] 1986 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting" and was a major factor in President Mar-

cos's ouster from the Philippines. But his proudest moment, he tells us, was graduating from the fire academy at the "ripe old age of 46."

UNSOLVED

by
Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

It was an outrage! Last night in Gravestone County, five mausoleums of the very rich were broken into and valuable articles stolen, including a lovely diamond choker. The county sheriff was particularly miffed because all the thefts occurred while he was on a doughnut break, that is, after eleven P.M. but before one A.M. (The sheriff likes to take his time while eating a dozen or so jelly-filled.)

From the clues below can you determine which robber sneaked into which cemetery and stole which item from which tomb?

1. Peaceful Slumber was sneaked into a half hour before Resting Hills, and it is known that Butchie Boy sneaked into one of them.

2. The pearl necklace was the last item to be pilfered.

3. The grave robber who stole a gold ring from the dead man did his dastardly deed twenty minutes before the stroke of midnight.

4. The emerald ring was stolen after twelve A.M., though not from Charlotte's Crypt and not by Canny Charlie.

5. Sarah's Sepulchre, which held neither the pearl necklace nor the garnet bracelet and was not found in Resting Hills, was robbed a half hour before Aimless Amos stole that which proved not to be an emerald ring.

6. Digger Dan broke into neither Mary's Mausoleum nor Vanna's Vault, though Eager Ernie stole from one of them, both robbers active before the witching hour.

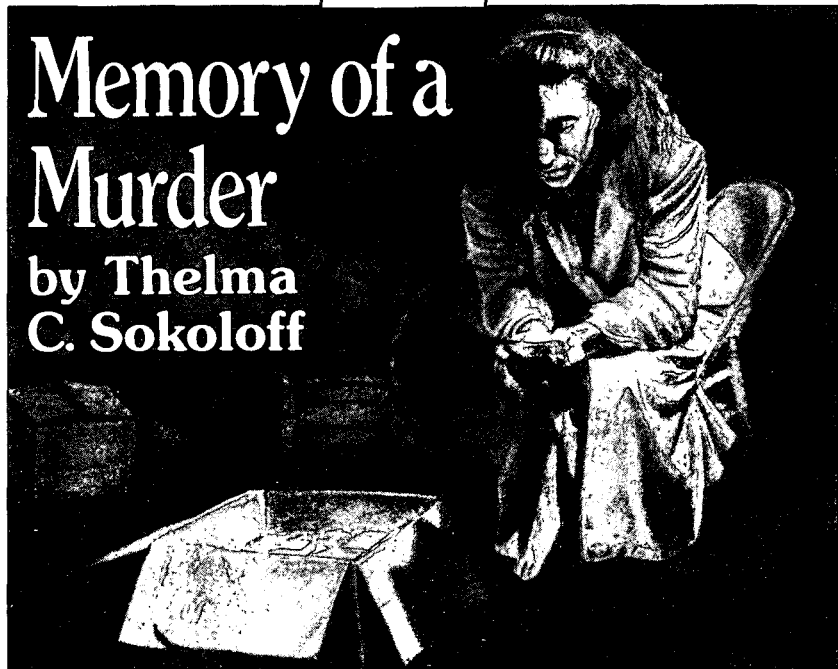
7. Tommy's Tomb, which was not robbed by Canny Charlie, cannot be found in either Shadow Oaks or Quiet Valley.

8. Robbers trespassed on both Shadow Oaks and Gone 'n' Forgotten consecutively, sometime after midnight, while Vanna's Vault was robbed a mere ten minutes prior to the theft at Tommy's Tomb.

See page 135 for the solution to the January puzzle.

Memory of a Murder

by Thelma C. Sokoloff



There was no doubt about it—the best thing about my job at the *Gazette* was the fun of working with the paper's eighty-two-year-old editor. Gus McAllister was not just the dearest, kindest man in the world, he was a walking reference book of everything I needed to know about the town.

He'd talk for hours about the old clamdiggers and the first local baseball team, the time the bank almost failed and the way the trolley used to break down every Saturday night. There were stories about the old days when the rich folks opened up their estates in the summer and the time the Prince of Wales played croquet on the lawn at the Belman place.

Funny thing was that as much as Gus loved to talk about the past, there was one story he'd never discuss—the murder at the Van Houton estate in 1932.

"So many nice things happened in this town, what do you want to go rummaging around in the town's rubbish pile for?" Gus would say, and then he'd change the subject, digging into his memory like a prospector mining gold nuggets. "Did I ever tell you about

the time Barnum brought his circus out here—marched the elephants and the whole shebang right down Main Street.”

I never had the heart to stop him, but sometimes when he ran on after five he'd catch himself and say, “There I go babbling on like Tennyson's ‘Brook,’ and you've got to get home to fix dinner for Steve and the boy. We'll talk another time.

“Listen,” he told me the first day I came to work. “There's a couple of things you ought to know about this office. First of all, my obituary and my wife Agnes's are all done. I'd like it fine if one night Aggie and I just went to sleep holding hands and didn't wake up. But since the good Lord doesn't consult me on these matters, I don't want some semiliterate reporter saying last words about me and my darling.” He smiled a crooked little smile, and the watery blue eyes lit up. I surmised that he might have been quite handsome some long ago.

“Second thing you have to know is that I've got the best collection of photos of this town in existence. Historical Society's been after 'em for years. Well, they're in these desk drawers, and I keep 'em locked. I wouldn't even take 'em home. My Aggie's some housekeeper, you know. Wouldn't want her tidying up one day and tossing out the last pictorial record of the Morgans and the Vanderbilts.”

As it turned out, Gus was correct in his assessment of the Lord's judgment. He and Aggie were not permitted to go together, hand in hand as he had wished. Six months after I came to work for the paper, Gus shuffled in one morning—his eyes red and swollen, his coat flapping in the breeze around his Ichabod Crane skinny figure. He fumbled in his pocket for the key to his desk drawer, removed a neatly typed sheet, and made a small notation in pencil. It was Agnes's obituary, and he had only written in her age. He left without a word.

The day after Agnes's funeral, I went to the office early and found Gus already there. In the best of times, he was a rumpled man. Now he looked like he'd been sleeping in his clothes for days.

“Gus, I just wanted you to know if there's anything Steve or I can do . . .” The tired words that everybody uses at these times trailed off.

He suddenly looked older than I had ever seen him. “Do you think Aggie knew I loved her?” He asked the question with the directness of a child who has challenged the existence of Santa Claus for the first time.

I thought about Gus clipping out little articles that he knew would interest his wife, buying recordings for her opera collection, advising the young politicians to consult with Agnes because she was the wisest person in town. "I don't think there could have been any doubt in her mind that you loved her very much." I watched as a little breath escaped from the old lips. My words seemed to put him at ease.

"I think," he said as he sharpened a handful of stubby pencils, "we better get onto the Decoration Day issue. We still have a newspaper to put out here."

In the following months, Gus continued to go home to the old clapboard house he'd shared with Agnes for the more than fifty years of their marriage. There were never any children—only Gus and Agnes and a succession of cocker spaniels, named for the characters of Agnes's favorite author. They'd buried Ophelia, Desdemona, and Juliet under a maple in the back yard. Now a tired, almost-blind Cordelia limped to meet him every night, apparently trying to hang onto life until Gus himself was ready to join Agnes.

We muddled through the Decoration Day issue and the Fourth of July and the Sailing and Boating issue and pretty soon Labor Day was at hand. And then one night as Steve and I were finishing the dishes, the phone rang. It was the police. There'd been an accident. Gus was in the hospital. Maybe a broken hip—the doctors were still looking at him. He had no family, but there were friends and neighbors. I wondered why they'd called me.

"I'll go right over to the hospital," I said. "Are you sure he's all right?"

"He's fine, ma'am." The voice was efficient and controlled. "It's not exactly Mr. McAllister we're calling about. It's all those newspapers that were in the back seat. Somebody here in the office knew you worked for the paper and thought you'd know what to do about them."

"What newspapers?" I marveled at the ability of the police to care about a batch of papers when Gus might be seriously injured.

"There are some pictures here and all kinds of old clippings. Looks like Mr. McAllister was taking them someplace when he cracked up the car."

The pit of my stomach dropped rapidly to the level of my knees. Gus's treasures that he'd hoarded all these years exposed to the prying eyes of strangers? "I'll be right over, officer. Don't let anybody touch Mr. McAllister's things."

I jumped in the car and drove through two stoplights. Why was Gus taking away the newspapers? Was he finally sorting out the bits and pieces of a lifetime? And why, I wondered, had he always been so secretive about the locked drawers?

I hurried into the station and stopped abruptly in front of a long wooden table piled high with the ancient papers. "Any word about Gus?" I asked, as though changing the subject could blot out the tangled mess that awaited me.

"He's resting comfortably, ma'am. I understand he's been asking about his papers."

The police provided me with three big cartons. I threw everything into the boxes, hoping only to finish and head for home. I peeked in on Gus on the way to my house and found that he was sleeping restlessly. The nurse on duty took a message that I had the papers and would return the next day.

Steve and I placed Gus's boxes in our basement and decided to wait for him to decide what to do with them. I slept fitfully that night, my mind a kaleidoscope of the photos and clippings that were resting downstairs. In all the months I'd stared at the locked drawers, I'd never wondered about their contents. Now the boxes beckoned me like someone's diary that I had no right to explore.

Sometime before dawn, I went downstairs. It was always cold in the basement, and with the heat not yet up, the chill permeated everything. I pulled my robe around me and opened the first box.

Gus was right about his pictures. The Historical Society would have a field day with them. There was Emile's, the elegant French restaurant on Shore Road, when it was nothing more than a blacksmith shop, and the bank before it became a woodworking shop. There were the visiting celebrities—Scott and Zelda at the beach, Gloria Swanson at the wheel of a Dusenbergs, Mayor Jimmy Walker surrounded by bathing beauties. There were honeymoon pictures of a skinnier-than-ever Gus with Agnes, an equally tall and slim bride but somehow dignified even in her youth. Gus's pictures were a treasure trove all right, but a small one. The meagre pile would nowhere near have filled all the drawers in Gus's big old desk. There must have been more secrets kept under lock and key, and I had not yet found them.

For more than an hour, I was spellbound by the history wedged between the yellowing pages. Some of the papers were too fragile to read, others only revealed their age by their old fashioned type and posed photos. And then as I started to put the boxes aside, my

eye was caught by an old manila folder bound with green silk cord. I pulled out the papers inside and saw that they were all about the Van Houton case.

The newspaper that appeared on August ninth, the day after the crime, told the story in a large black headline. "Loretta Van Houton Shot at Family Estate." The subhead explained further: "Husband Held in Suspected Love Triangle." The story carried the byline of a long forgotten reporter, and a note explained that the pinch-hitter was taking the place of Gus McAllister, who was ill with the flu.

Like everyone in town, I'd heard the story a hundred times, but actually reading about it was shocking although more than fifty years had passed. Here in our town people went to the beach and shopped at the market—murders and love trysts were something that happened somewhere else. I read on about how the sumptuous Norman-style castle had been the scene of the shooting of Loretta Van Houton, twenty-five-year-old wife of Benson Van Houton, heir to a copper fortune. "Mr. Van Houton," the story continued, "is being held without bail in the death of his wife."

I turned the page and read that, according to the servants in the house, the Van Houtons had quarreled frequently—each jealous of the other. He had accused his beautiful young wife of an affair with another man; she claimed to have proof that the glamorous society matron who had been his first wife was determined to win him back. The night of the murder, Loretta had been heard to cry that she could stand no more unhappiness and was leaving to return to her family.

There were pictures of Loretta's funeral, and an entire folder devoted to the trial. A battery of highpowered lawyers had defended the multimillionaire, who denied that he'd killed his wife. Benson testified that the last time he saw her alive was when he stormed out of the music room after the argument. He had then gone to bed and was awakened an hour later by a shot. He ran to the lower level of the house, saw Loretta lying on the floor, and, as he darted to the french doors, caught a glimpse of a tall, thin figure rushing through the darkness toward the beach. At that point he blacked out.

In still another folder I found the story of Benson's acquittal on grounds of insufficient evidence. There were pictures of a smiling Benson shaking hands with his lawyers; more photos of him waving from an ocean liner as he set sail for Cannes accompanied by

his business manager, his personal physician, and the first Mrs. Van Houton.

From the very back of the folder, a yellowing envelope dropped into my lap. I opened it reluctantly and discovered what I had hoped I wouldn't find—a link between Gus and the Van Houton case that was more than just the relationship between local editor and the town's leading family. Slowly I lifted a small gold pocket watch from the envelope and stared at the beautiful face of Loretta Van Houton. Engraved on the back of the watch were the words, "For Gus—1932."

I stuffed the watch back in the envelope as though I'd stumbled on something too horrible to view, put the brittle bits of paper back in the boxes, and stacked the photos in neat piles. I left the basement with my thoughts whirling like snowflakes in a blizzard. The whole story was falling into place just like every story I'd ever written for the paper. Was Gus the tall, thin stranger Benson saw dashing away from the dead girl? The newspaper's explanation that he was ill with flu—a perfect alibi, easily fabricated by the paper's editor?

I headed for the hospital and hoped Gus would never know I'd rummaged through the past that he'd warned me to leave alone. It was difficult to associate the hospital's antiseptic smell and dull buff walls with Gus. I only thought of him sitting in our office, surrounded by glossy black and white photos and reams of yellow typing paper. A nurse was smoothing his bed when I went into the room.

"Paper looks pretty good, considering it's being put out by a semiliterate reporter without the senior editor," he said.

"We do our best. I'm a bit short-staffed, you know."

He looked at me a long time, and the gaze was very steady. "You've got my pictures and clippings, I understand."

"They're quite safe with me," I told him. "They'll be waiting for you when you get out of here."

"It's a funny thing," he said. "I was taking it all home to burn in the back yard—except the pictures, of course. Finally going to give them to the Historical Society. Didn't quite make it, but that wasn't the worst of it."

"No?"

"Worst of it was my secret had to end up in the hands of a news-hen who has the same curiosity as every other reporter. So I'm quite sure you've found out everything by now."

"I know about you and Loretta, if that's what you mean. I'm truly sorry, Gus. I feel somewhat like Pandora, but now that I know this much . . ." I groped for the right words. "Now I must know it all."

Gus closed his eyes, and a little shudder went through the frail body. For several minutes, he seemed far away in another time and place. When he finally spoke, his voice came almost in a whisper. "She wanted me to go away with her. She was going to tell Agnes about—about us, and I couldn't let that happen. It was the only way to keep Aggie from being hurt. I couldn't let . . ." The weary words tumbled slowly from the dry old lips, and I looked away, unable to hear any more.

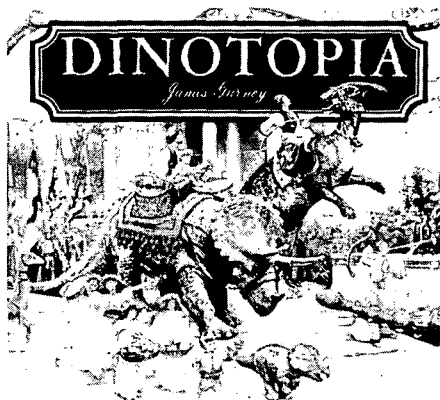
I slipped silently out of the room, taking one last glance at the weeping Gus, and thought how unbelievable it was that this gentle soul could have been capable of murder.

I pulled into the driveway and hoped that nobody was home. I needed to be alone with my secret. I needed to sort out my thoughts. From the back seat, I removed my coat and umbrella and picked up a large manila envelope that must have fallen off the last of Gus's cartons. I carried it into the house and had started to put it aside until my next trip to the basement when the words "Paid Bills" scribbled in Gus's spidery handwriting jumped out at me. He had been right about the old news-hen's curiosity. I opened the envelope and pried through the pile—mortgage payments, automobile installments, department store bills. Gus had saved everything.

Then came the doctor bills, even the vet receipts for poor old Cordelia, and an ancient hospital bill for Gus McAllister's stay, August fifth through August fifteenth, 1932. I stared incredulously at the yellowed paper, the long ago dates signaling me like a beacon. Loretta had been killed on the night of August eighth. Gus was not just ill with flu—he was hospitalized on that fateful night.

I knew now that there was no way, no way that Gus could have been there to commit the terrible crime. I made my way out the front door feeling that I must have fresh air to clear my aching head, and then I knew the truth that had been buried so long. There was only one reason Gus would have admitted to a murder that he didn't commit, to protect the memory of the one who did, the one who had a perfect motive—Agnes, the tall, thin figure running, running away from the murder of Loretta Van Houton.

WORLDS OF WONDER THAT CHARM, ENTERTAIN & INSPIRE

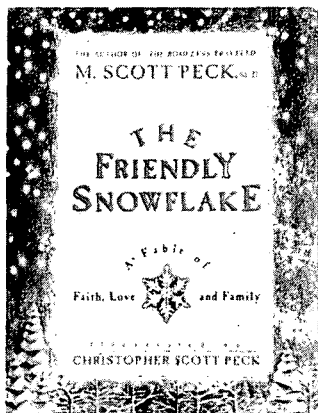


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FICTION

The Rememberer

by Charles Ardai

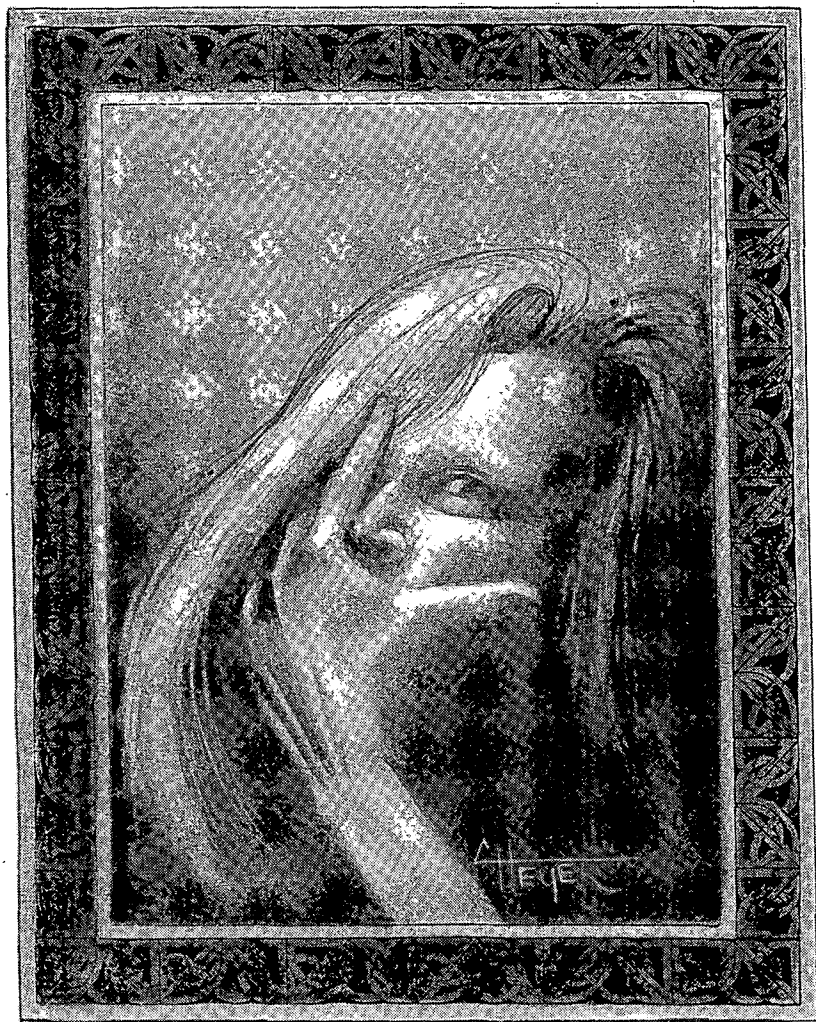


Illustration by Carol Heyer

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Lucas Gould rubbed his fingers along the surfaces he was connecting. Both pieces of wood were rough, unsanded, raw, yet when he turned them and pressed them together, they fit seamlessly, like neighboring pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. His was a talented eye and a delicate hand. He could select fallen, crooked branches from a dozen trees and fit them together with no gaps between. He could build a stone wall that would last a lifetime and keep out the fiercest winds. And he could take unsanded boards, as he was doing now, and make furniture so fine from them that it appeared to have been carved from a solid block of wood.

His neighbors spoke of this ability as magic, but while there was magic in his art, this was not it. Sensitivity, patience—nothing more. Nothing less, either.

Lucas separated the boards and laid them side by side on his long trestle table. He pulled a steel pan nearer to him and refreshed the coals in it by blowing on them. Nestled in this bed of hot coals was the black pipkin that held his glue. He selected a brush from a rack hanging overhead and dipped it into the bubbling paste. As he pulled the brush out, a string of glue stretched between the brush and the pipkin, as though the glue itself was reluctant to separate.

Each board lay on its narrow side, the uppermost edge ready to take the glue. Lucas coated each of these edges with feathery strokes of the brush, redipping twice to cover the surfaces completely.

Then he laid the brush aside and lifted his stylus from where it lay against his breast at the end of a gold chain. The stylus was a thin shaft of metal, longer than a dart but shorter than an arrow and more carefully fashioned than either. It gleamed in the reflected light of the workshop candles as Lucas twisted it back and forth between his fingers.

He bent to his task. At the top of one board, Lucas pressed the tip of the stylus into the glue. He pressed it in deep, until the entire point was within the wood, and then he began moving the stylus, never raising it, in straight lines and curves, inscribing words of connection in the glue and in the wood.

When he pulled the stylus away, no glue stuck to its tip; nor did any when he did so again, after finishing the identical inscription on the second plank. Yet before he let the stylus rest against his chest again, he wiped off the point with a cloth he kept hooked under his belt.

The boards were ready now. He lifted them and fitted them together, edge to edge, as he had before. Only this time, they did not come apart. Nor would they, ever, short of being broken as any wood can be. The two pieces were now one piece, in every ordinary sense. And if they were yet two pieces in some extraordinary sense—well, that is where the magic of Lucas Gould's art lay.

He stepped to a bin against the wall where pieces of wood lay stacked according to size and shape and texture. He chose two pieces, then put one back and chose another. These two pieces he took to his worktable. He was about to begin fitting them together when a sudden clangor of bells signaled that someone had entered his shop.

"I'm in the back," he called out. He looked up to see who had come to him.

Footsteps approached. Damian Ryerson slipped his head around the door jamb. He asked in a whisper, "Am I interrupting you?"

"Not at all," Lucas said. "Come in."

Damian shuffled into view. He was carrying a leatherbound book whose partially decayed spine still held the letters "ICTIONARY." On top of the book he held a signature of sixteen pages which had apparently separated from the binding. Lucas glanced at the first of these pages as Damian placed them on the table: "Loom" to "Loose." He turned the signature over: "Massacre" to "Mastoid." Important pages. But then, they all were.

Lucas found the place in the dictionary where the pages belonged. "You want me to put these back in?"

"If you could." Damian stuffed his hands in his pockets, then after a second took them out again. "Listen," he said haltingly, "how much is this going to cost?"

Lucas continued sighting along the spine. "No charge. For the library, no charge. But don't let it get around."

Damian looked down and Lucas looked up. Their eyes didn't meet. Damian was blushing. "The library has some money."

"Use it to buy more books."

"Thank you, Lucas," Damian said.

"Don't mention it."

Damian backed out of the room.

Lucas made a trial fitting of the pages into the book. It didn't work. The fit was too tight. He took them out and put them aside. He'd fix the book in a day or two. He'd fix it so well that even if every other page fell out, "Loom" to "Mastoid" would hang from

the binding till doomsday. But first things first: the crib for Macomber's son. He lifted the pieces of wood again.

But the bells over his front door rang once more and once more he put the wood down. Lucas's first thought was that it was Damian again, coming back with all the rest of the library's tattered books for him to repair. But the footsteps were not Damian's this time—they weren't even one man's. There were three sets of footsteps, and heavy ones, as though all three men were wearing boots.

Which they were. Lucas watched as they tramped in, the one in the lead wearing a police captain's badge around his neck, the other two wearing sergeant's stripes and carrying a heavy chest between them. The sergeants set the chest down at Lucas's feet. The captain removed his cap. Lucas touched the chest with his foot. It felt like touching a block of ice.

"Lucas Gould?" the captain asked.

"Yes?"

"You are Lucas Gould, the . . . fashioner?"

"Yes?"

The captain stepped forward with a hand extended. "I am Captain Nigel Breagh." Lucas shook his hand. "I am afraid this is police business."

"Something I've done?"

"Oh no. No, certainly not." Captain Breagh walked over to the chest and slipped its two padlocks open with a key hanging from his belt. But he did not open the chest. "The police need your assistance, Mr. Gould."

"Anything I can do," Lucas said. He looked at the chest curiously. In the heat of the workshop, the metal sides of the chest had begun to sweat. Drops of condensation ran in runnels down its flanks, as on a piece of thawing meat. "What have you got in there?" he asked.

"It's what we need your help with, Mr. Gould." Breagh squatted next to the chest. He wiped off some of the droplets with his hand. "Do you read the papers, sir?"

"Some."

"Have you read about the Butcher of Queensbury Row?"

"I'm not sure."

One of the sergeants stepped forward, rubbing his hands together to warm them. "The Butcher has killed six women in six months. Six that we know of, in any case. It is hard to determine, since the man—we assume it's a man—cuts up the corpses and

spreads the pieces around Queensbury Row, sometimes as far away as Chesterton."

"He always goes after young women," Breagh said. "Always dark-haired, always slim, always the same build. Five foot two to five foot four inches tall. Nineteen to twenty-one years old. And he always cuts them up in the same places. He cuts their legs off, then their arms, then their heads. And then he cuts their torsos in half at the waist. Perfect, clean cuts. Like a butcher."

Lucas stepped away from the sweating metal chest. It was starting to feel colder, not warmer.

"We think he's a doctor," the sergeant who had spoken before said. "Because he cuts so well. Or a failed medical student, in which case he'd be on the university's records. We are researching that possibility."

"But so far, we have had no success," Captain Breagh said. "And we are becoming desperate. Your fame, Mr. Gould, has spread to the south, and you are well known in our jurisdiction. I'll admit I had never heard of you, and when one of our men suggested we come to you, I resisted—you mustn't take offense. You can imagine why I resisted. We are asking the impossible of you, and if it is not the impossible, so much the worse. So much the worse."

Breagh looked up at Lucas and fixed him with a stare that had faced a hundred types of death and would face a hundred more. "But that was two killings ago, Mr. Gould. That was before we found Lucy Balmont's head in a sewer pipe and Ariadne Gray's in a stable."

He lifted the top of the chest. Inside was a layer of cracked ice. Through the ice, Lucas could see distorted white shapes. "Prepare yourself, man. These are pieces of the corpses."

Lucas forced himself to watch as Captain Breagh pushed the ice to one side of the chest. A pair of arms, the pale color of dead flesh, gradually emerged.

"We have never found all the pieces of any of the victims. We don't know why this is. We don't know if he's keeping pieces, and if he is, what he is doing with them. Some of the pieces we have found have themselves been mutilated. And we buried the remains of the first two victims before we realized we were dealing with a serial murderer. This is why it has taken us until now to collect enough sound body parts to make a whole person." Breagh stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. "That's what's in the chest, Mr. Gould."

"You're not asking me to put them together, are you?"

Breagh nodded. "Can you? The people who suggested I come to you were confident you could."

"Well, I can and I can't," Lucas said. "I'm no Dr. Frankenstein. I may be able to put the pieces together, but all you'll have then is a whole corpse. I don't see what good that will do you."

"I see. We had thought you might be able to . . . but of course not." Breagh laughed to himself, an ugly, pained laugh. "Reanimate a corpse. Well, Mr. Gould, when you are as desperate as I am, you grasp at straws. I am sorry to have taken your time." He motioned for the sergeants to take up the chest.

Lucas leaned against his table and buried his face in his hands. Was there nothing he could do? Of course there was nothing—there was nothing anyone could do. Except . . .

Except that in his logs of devices and inscriptions, of secret formulas and forbidden arts, there were hints of just what Breagh was suggesting. Hints—no more. Yet perhaps there would be some combination that could accomplish something. And perhaps in his father's private logs, the locked books he had for so long left unopened, perhaps there he would find a tool he could use.

He glanced into the chest as the sergeants shifted the ice back over the young girls' arms. Surely he could do something. At least there would be a complete corpse to bury, even if it wasn't any one victim's corpse. That, at least, would be something.

"Wait."

Breagh motioned his men to stop.

"I might be able to do something." Lucas ran his hand through his hair. "I could try."

"Is it worth our time?" Breagh asked.

"Yes," Lucas said. "I think it is."

"You understand," Breagh said, "our thought was that from the parts of these four women you could build one." Lucas nodded. "They were all of the same height and build, you see, so we thought it might be possible . . . and if you were successful, we thought the woman might remember her killer. Or at least some details of the attack. Attacks."

Lucas nodded again. "Please leave me," he said, kneeling beside the chest. "I'll try." He plunged his hands into the ice and lifted out one of the arms. It was light and delicate and severed smoothly at the shoulder. He brushed some chips of ice off and let the arm rest on his fingertips. "Please go."

The two sergeants stepped out. "I will call on you in a week," Breagh said. "Earlier if there is a new development."

But Lucas said nothing, gave no indication that he had even heard. So the captain rejoined his men and left.

When they had gone, Lucas locked the front door and pulled the shades over his windows. He repacked the arm, closed the chest, and extinguished his candles. Macomber would have to wait, and so would the library. He went upstairs to his study.

The key, Lucas discovered on his fifth night of research, lay not in the inscription but in its placement—rather, not in the inscription alone, for the choice of the inscription was also crucial. Lucas unshelved volume after volume, scanning his notes and his father's notes and the notes of Gould fathers going back five centuries for clues on how to proceed. He read crabbed and faded handwriting, deciphering and interpreting an endless succession of instructions, hints, and warnings.

It had been done.

Dead flesh had been reanimated, occasionally for a short time, less often permanently, but it had been done. Lucas' great-great-great-grandfather Lemuel Gould had brought back to life the drowned daughter of Jansson Miller; they had married six months later and produced a son ten months after that. So reanimated blood ran in Lucas's own veins.

But as for the actual procedure, the notes were guarded, the instructions vague. Severe warnings against tampering with the laws of God ran through every paragraph and every page. This was the common theme of generation after generation: that under no circumstances was the procedure to be undertaken without careful preparation, for the dangers were great both to the subject and to the fashioner.

The stylus that was the fashioner's tool could sunder far more readily than it could reconnect. This Lucas knew—but when working human flesh the danger grew tenfold, for the fashioner himself was made of human flesh and it was his body he risked destroying, his own soul he could through error lose. It was for this that the fashioner's stylus had a point at either end: to remind him that each change he worked on the materials in his hands was a change worked on him as well.

Lucas read these pages eagerly, anxiously, copying notes onto a tablet on his lap. Then, finally, in a record from 1802, Lucas read

of a successful experiment along the lines of the one he had to undertake. Cameron Gould of Normandy had had a child abducted from its crib. The thieves were caught: gypsies, in a band that had traveled the length of the continent stealing and selling infants. But when the constables approached the gypsy camp, the thieves fell on the marks of their guilt, the children, and hacked them to death with swords. The murderers were guillotined, of course, but this afforded little relief to the grieving parents. Cameron claimed his son's remains and spent four days knitting them together. Then, calling upon all the art at his command, he inscribed the mark of Ibor on his son's forehead.

The boy awakened. He remembered nothing of his ordeal, and his parents reared him in never-dimmed gratitude. No negative repercussions ever arose, though at age nineteen Claus ran away from home rather than learn his father's art.

Cameron's younger son, Daniel, took up the mantle his brother had cast off, eventually passing it on to his own firstborn, Lucas. It was with Lucas that the family history concluded.

The night sky was growing lighter when Lucas finished reading this account. He set his pen down and shook out his wrist.

He considered the ordeal of Cameron Gould. Had Lucas never read this story before? It was hard to imagine. Perhaps. But stranger still, his father and grandfather had never spoken of it—not to him, at least. A sad episode, Lucas thought, a life starting in death. How can a child ever get over that? How can a parent? And then suddenly Lucas could understand why it had never been spoken of in his house, why it had been locked away in a book never to be opened except in a time of desperation.

Lucas walked downstairs slowly, savoring the growing light of dawn. He raised the blinds in his workshop and let sunlight spill over his table and his tools. Each object emerged from shadow and filled with color like an image in a photograph slowly developing.

Lucas uncovered the chest that held the remains of the Butcher's victims. He had changed the ice daily and now he removed it, piece by piece, into a metal bucket. Each body part—arm, leg, leg, chest, head—was finely preserved, and as Lucas lined them up on his worktable he imagined them watching him and anticipating the day's labor. For the body would have to participate in its own construction; even pieces of stone and wood became active participants in Lucas's hands. He lit the fire and set coals to heat. He

mixed a glue unlike his normal glues in many ways, like in many others. He towed each limb dry and set them all in order. And then, as the flesh, the coals, and the glue all warmed, Lucas lit the candles in each corner of the room and sat to polish his stylus.

When it was ready, he was ready as well. He made the last of his preparations, said a short prayer, and set to work.

He began at the bottom, attaching the two legs to the lower torso. He brushed glue on each stump delicately, then above each thigh, until all four surfaces gleamed and were warm to the touch. Then he lifted his stylus and pressed it into the stumps, working the flesh, inscribing letters from dead alphabets and alphabets of the soul, leaving marks of consecration and connection to hold flesh to flesh and bone to bone. The muscles in his arms and the veins in his temples bulged from the strain, but once he had begun an inscription, he never stopped.

The wounds did not match, of course—all were smooth, more or less, but they were smooth differently. But Lucas had no choice of which piece to attach and which to reject: there were enough pieces for the task and no more. So he worked slowly and carefully, fitting the pieces together, finding the one position in a thousand that allowed the connections to take.

His eye did not fail and his hand did not shake. He put the small, fragile body together piece by piece until there were no pieces left and a woman lay dead on his table; and when he reached this point, he began to cry for all the dead women produced so swiftly and easily and for the beautiful, young corpse he had spent all his energy to build. He placed his head by the corpse's feet and wept until night fell. And when it did, he rose, warmed his stylus in the dying embers of his fire, and walked around to the corpse's head.

He brushed the light black hair away from the forehead and wiped the clammy skin with a cloth. He wondered for an instant whose head it was that he had attached, and to whose neck it was that he had attached it; he wondered whose mouth would feed whose stomach if he was successful, whose legs would carry whose body through a lifetime of summers and winters. He wondered whose memories the woman would have, and how horrified she would be to awaken in a cold, alien, sewn-together cask of flesh.

He wondered all this as he held his stylus poised above the center of her forehead, measured out precisely in pencil on her brow; and then he cleared all thought from his mind to make room for the concentration he needed in order to complete his work.

He pressed the stylus into her forehead until the tip was fully embedded. Lucas had to strain to get it in all the way. Then with both hands he pulled it along the complex and detailed lines that made up the mark of Ibor. The mark took shape in thin red lines, left behind in the stylus's wake.

To the mark of Ibor, Lucas added two designs of his own devising. He connected the three symbols as letters are linked in cursive writing, each subtly altering and altered by its neighbors. The dead face grew flushed and warm as Lucas proceeded, and the flush radiated outward as the design reached completion. Lucas saw peripherally, as he carefully inscribed the final strokes, that a wave of color was moving along the woman's naked form, filling her arms and her fingers, then her knees, then her shins.

Color spread into her ankles, her heels, her soles. Her whole body began to tremble violently. Lucas held her head steady and carefully pulled his stylus out. The hole it had made smoothed out instantly, and the woman's eyelids began to shiver. Her lips squirmed, independent of one another; her fingers drummed on the wood beneath them; her back arched sharply, then released, then arched once more.

And then, with a jerk, the woman sat up, opened her eyes, and screamed.

The scream emerged from her mouth like a bullet from a gun and with much the same effect. It filled the workshop, reverberating in the walls, shaking the windows in their frames. It was a cry of pure anguish, as though the poor woman was reliving in an instant six horrible deaths and a return to life more painful than any. The scream went on and on and did not die. Lucas felt his scalp tighten and tiny hairs rise all over his body.

He went to the woman's side and put his arms around her, moving her head to his shoulder. When he touched her, she stopped screaming; and as he drew her to his chest, the echoes slowly faded. Lucas kissed her neck and, a moment later, felt a stream of hot tears on his.

He bathed her in a basin each morning and asked her no questions. He fed her hot meals and made a robe for her to wear. When Captain Breagh arrived at the end of the week, Lucas turned him away. Reluctantly, the captain left.

And he named her, since she remembered no name of her own.

The name he gave her was Lenore, after his first love, a girl who had died of pneumonia when they had both been eleven. Each day, Lenore's scars became fainter, fading from angry red creases at her thighs, shoulders, and waist to pale, pink welts, and finally they disappeared altogether.

She walked more steadily day by day. On her fourth day, she had the strength to go outside and feel the winter wind stinging her cheeks. This made her smile—but an instant later her face clouded over, encountering in the chill of the air an ugly half-memory. She walked back inside and spent an hour next to Lucas's fire, bundled up under a quilt.

"Are you cold?" Lucas asked her.

"I'm never warm," she said.

Each day Lucas stood nearer to her, spent more of his time watching her recover. He put her to bed each night with a kiss and a tear, and one night the kiss strayed to her lips and every night from then on it started there.

Lenore was warm and safe, but she was weak. When she complained of the cold, Lucas stripped off his shirt and added a log to the fire.

Some days he thought he loved her, this quiet girl who spoke so gravely and shivered in the hottest room. On other days he remembered how he had first seen her, in dead fragments, and on those days he was overcome with shame and sorrow. But as the days passed, a balance shifted inside him, and after a certain point he never again saw pieces of flesh on a workshop table when he closed his eyes and thought of Lenore.

As for her, Lenore remembered nothing that had happened before she had awakened. She remembered no childhood, no adolescence, no home, no family. She remembered no killer, no death. All these memories seemed not so much lost forever as set aside in a locked chamber of her mind—a chamber for which there was perhaps a key, but a key that neither Lucas nor Lenore especially wanted to find.

She knew what had happened to her because after a few days she had asked, and Lucas had told her. She had wondered about the scars, the ones on her body that swiftly faded and the one on her forehead that did not; and when she asked, Lucas held her in his arms and explained.

"You have gone through something no other living soul has," he said.

"I was dead," Lenore said.

So she had guessed. "Yes."

"And for how long was I dead?"

"No more than four months," Lucas said. Lenore nodded slowly, taking the information in. "But there is more than that. You were a victim of a horrible crime. Someone killed you and then—"

"Dismembered me," she said. "The scars. You put me together."
"Yes."

"How is that possible?"

Lucas shook his head. "It isn't. But sometimes when no one is looking, it is possible to do the impossible."

Lenore raised her arms over her head and held Lucas's face, a palm on each cheek. She touched him gently, moving her fingers in little circles. "Thank you," she said, after a long silence.

Lucas shook his head. "Don't thank me. Please, Lenore, don't thank me. Just hold me."

And she did.

The day came when Captain Breagh would not be put off, and by then Lucas felt that Lenore was sufficiently recovered to see him. The three of them sat together in Lucas's workshop, the captain sweating in the heat, Lenore covered in a tunic and a shawl. She held Breagh's gaze, each staring at the other in sadness and wonder. Lucas sat between them, holding Lenore's hand.

"My blessed Lord, Gould. I don't believe it."

"Lucas told me that you brought me to him," Lenore said. "I owe you my life."

"I had no idea that it could be done," Breagh said.

"You must have had some idea."

"No," Breagh insisted. "I never imagined this. That parts of four women could be combined into one—"

An awkward silence fell.

"Has there been any progress?" Lucas asked.

Breagh shook his head. "None. Nor any new killings, thank heaven. But one is coming. I can feel it."

Lenore shivered. Lucas squeezed her hand.

"You found nothing at the university?"

"Nothing. It cannot be one of their students. We checked quite thoroughly."

"So what's left?" Lucas said.

"We wait for the Butcher to kill again, and hope he makes a mistake," Breagh said. "Unless you—" he turned to Lenore—"have remembered anything."

"I haven't," Lenore said.

The captain leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Please. I realize that it's painful. But you must force yourself to remember."

"It isn't painful," Lenore said. "I remember nothing at all."

"Where he met you," Breagh insisted, "what he looked like, how tall he was. Anything."

Lenore shook her head.

"Was he old? Was he young? Did he use a knife? Did he drug you?"

"I'm sorry," Lenore said. Then she turned to Lucas. Her shoulders shook. "Is it cold in here, or is it me?"

Lucas and Captain Breagh exchanged a glance. Lucas stood to rebuild the fire. Breagh stood, too, and walked to the door. "As soon as you remember anything," he told Lenore, "please get in touch with me. Other women's lives depend on it."

He left. A few minutes passed in silence.

"Lucas," Lenore said.

"Yes?" Lucas returned from the fireplace.

There were tears forming in Lenore's eyes. "Can you do something to me to make me remember?"

Lucas shook his head. "I don't know how."

"Please, Lucas, I can't bear to know that other women will die because I can't remember who killed me. I have to do something."

"I cannot make you remember. Only you can, and I'm not sure it is a good idea."

"I have to try," Lenore said.

Late that night, Lucas awoke from a deep sleep to find Lenore missing from the bed they shared. He padded softly downstairs and found her sitting crosslegged in front of the mirror at the end of the hall, staring intently into her own eyes. Lucas returned silently to bed.

Four women.

The mirror was a dressing mirror with three panels, the two on the sides hinged and angled to reflect all sides of the person in front. Lenore looked down at herself and then into the eyes of the three images before her.

Four women, each her, each outside of her, each looking back

into the others' eyes. Each looking at the scar, half hidden under hair, that marked the forehead of her three neighbors.

Had she been four women? Was it possible? She could not remember being even one. And now . . . was she now four? Or one?

She pulled open the knot of her belt and let her robe pool around her on the floor. With her fingertips she could feel what she could no longer see, the crease that ran around her waist where she had been cut in half. In half! Like a magician's gimmick, cut and restored, cut and put together with other women's cut pieces.

But among all these pieces and all the women, where was she? The body she wore felt somehow separate from her, as though she were a tiny being trapped in a strange, cold cell. Each limb felt strange to the others. When she touched her legs with her hand, she felt as though she were touching someone else's—and, at the same time, as though someone else was touching hers.

She could not stop noticing her body. She was constantly aware that it was there, surrounding her, even though she could not identify what the *her* was that it surrounded.

And always, always, deathly cold, as though she were a corpse still.

From the staircase Lenore heard soft footsteps. She could feel Lucas's gaze on her body. It was not an unkind gaze—it was the gaze of a lover, not of a craftsman. Yet it only made her feel colder. She did not look up, did not let him know she knew he was there.

He wanted to understand, but how could he? No one alive knew what she was going through. And when Lucas left, four women or not, she felt utterly alone.

““Where is she?” Lucas motioned for Breagh to keep his voice down. “Lenore’s asleep. Upstairs.”

“She has remembered nothing?”

“Nothing. Maybe it is the best thing for her.”

“The best for her, the worst for us,” Breagh said. “Can’t you do anything, Gould? You brought her back to life, for God’s sake—isn’t there some drug you could give her for her memory?”

“There isn’t. And if there were, I wouldn’t use it.” Lucas heard his voice turn hard. “Try to imagine what she has been through. You want her to remember that?”

“Try to imagine what Daphne McGillis went through last night, damn it! Which she wouldn’t have gone through if Lenore had

remembered a single detail. Anything. One detail could be enough, and she's not even giving us that." Breagh paced to the workshop windows. He spoke without turning around. "We've got nothing to go on, Gould. We're nowhere. We've got a killer who's as easy to pin down as smoke. The only advantage we have on him is Lenore, and she's not giving us anything."

"I can't help you more than I have," Lucas said.

"She can."

Breagh turned around and fixed Lucas with a forceful stare.

"When she can, she will," Lucas said. "She wants to. She's not ready."

"She's ready."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she's ready. And we're ready for her. We can't wait. It would have been better if she had been able to name her killer. That's what we wanted. But it's not the only way we can use her."

"I don't want to know what you're talking about," Lucas said. "She's a human being. She's not yours to use."

"Listen to me," Breagh said. "The Butcher always picks the same type of woman as a victim. We never know who he will pick next, but we know what she will look like. She will look like Lenore."

"Stop right there—"

Breagh wasn't stopping. "We don't know who he'll pick and who he won't pick. Except for Lenore. We know he'll pick Lenore if he has the chance, because he already has. Four times he picked her. If we put Lenore on the street, we can lure him out."

"No."

"We can. And we would have officers watching Lenore at all times. We would be sure to catch him."

"Forget it! You might catch him and you might not. But there's no way you could guarantee Lenore's safety." Lucas thought of young Claus Gould—his kidnappers had been caught, but it hadn't stopped them from killing him. "It's too dangerous."

"We will do everything in our power to protect Lenore. And if we fail . . . Gould, you put her back together once, you can do it again."

"I cannot go through that again. And neither can she."

"I'm sorry," Breagh said. "It's our only chance. We have to take it."

"No."

"With all due respect, it's not your decision to make."

"It certainly isn't yours," Lucas said.

"No, it's mine."

Lenore pulled her shawl tighter over her bosom and came down to the foot of the stairs. She walked unsteadily into the workshop. "It's my decision, Lucas." She turned to Captain Breagh. He said nothing. "I will do what I have to."

"You can't, Lenore, please—"

"Please what? Please stand by and watch another six murders, and then another six, and be glad it's not me? It is me, Lucas. Every woman who dies is me. Every one of them dies because of me. I owe them this much."

"You don't owe them your life," Lucas pleaded. "You already lost that once. No one can ask you to risk it again."

Lenore's voice shook when she spoke. "No one has to ask. I have to do it."

Lucas said nothing.

"Thank you," Captain Breagh said. And then to Lucas he whispered, "I'm sorry. I really am sorry."

The police carried Lenore to Queensbury Row in a horsecart, dropping her off on the fringe of the neighborhood. Derelict, burnt-out, three story houses loomed to the left and to the right. A few paces behind Lenore, two large men hung back in the shadows watching her. These were the two sergeants who had carried the chest to Lucas Gould's workshop weeks before, currently dressed in tatters and richly begrimed. Other eyes watched Lenore as she picked her way into Queensbury Row, but none watched her more intently or more tenaciously.

Lenore wore a light veil that partially covered her face and a heavy shawl over a winter dress. But the dress did not hide her shape, and she wore flat shoes to ensure that her height was obvious. She walked with apparent purpose toward the north end of the Row, but when she reached there, she turned down a side street and headed back to the south. In this way, she crossed the entire Row, but slowly enough that when she returned to her starting point the people who had seen her first were no longer there.

Queensbury Row was an ill-lit cluster of buildings, the center of Newsander's illegal drug trade and barely legal network of brothels and inns. People with legitimate business rarely came down to Queensbury Row, and when they did they left as soon as their business was completed. It was the Row's old residents who suf-

ferred the most, the ones whose families predated the Row's current condition. A combination of pride and despair, lightly seasoned with poverty, forced such families to remain where they were and hope for the future. Such hope had never been rewarded, though in each generation there were those who believed it might be.

Men approached Lenore several times as she walked the streets; but on close examination it was clear that she was no streetwalker, and with the easy access the Row provided to the genuine article, no one saw the need to molest her further. Still, she quickened her pace after each such encounter, unaware that many of the men who approached her were police decoys assigned to keep her in sight. Even had she suspected this, she could not have told which were the decoys and which were not. So she walked quickly and then slowly, depending on whom she saw around her, and crossed the entire Row twice without luring the Butcher into the open.

She was shivering from the cold and limping slightly as she started a third circuit when an older man, paunchy and better dressed than most, suggested that she join him in the Ray of Sunshine for a chat and a rest. Lenore recognized Captain Breagh under his extensive makeup, for he had shown her the disguise earlier in the day. Grateful for the chance to sit down and warm up, she accompanied him inside.

The flames in the inn's fireplace crackled and leapt to heights of two or three feet, scorching racks of meat that a servant turned slowly with an iron crank. Captain Breagh led Lenore to a table in the corner and ordered a cup of ale. At the tables around them, pleasantly tired men drank rounds to each other's health and laughed loudly at nothing in particular. Breagh leaned close to Lenore's ear. "Anything?"

"No."

The hostess brought the ale, bending deeply in Breagh's direction to hint at other services she might perform. Breagh shook his head, and the transaction was off—it was as simple as that. The hostess turned to Lenore, who followed Breagh's lead and shook her head. The hostess shrugged. She picked up the money Breagh had placed in front of her and left.

"Make one more circuit," Breagh said. "Take your time. Let everyone see you. If that doesn't work, we'll take you home, try again in a few days."

Lenore nodded and stood up to leave. "Be careful," Breagh said.

"I will be," Lenore said, mostly to herself. Then she was out in

the winter night once more. The breeze was brisk now. It scoured her face and slipped in between her layers of clothing, teasing up gooseflesh all over her body. She walked quickly to warm up, then remembered what Captain Breagh had told her and slowed down. The deep shadows just beyond the light of every doorway had a menacing cast this late at night. Each inn pushed the night away from its doors and into the street, sweeping the thick, unbroken darkness into Lenore's path. Lenore walked through the night, surrounded by footsteps and shadow figures. Each shape became a killer in her mind's eye, and twice she almost screamed aloud when the wind on her shoulder pressed down the way a hand might.

She clutched the pendant Lucas had hung around her neck and whispered his name to herself as though one or both could protect her. But she knew they could not and tried desperately to watch all the people around her. Once she saw Captain Breagh again, in the distance, and once she saw another policeman she thought she recognized. Otherwise she was alone among strangers. She forced herself to walk steadily only by concentrating on her duty. She must get through the night, at all costs; she must not pray for the Butcher not to show up, since if he did not she would have accomplished nothing. But she did pray for it, of course, and for a long time it appeared that her prayer would be granted.

But then a figure loomed out of the darkness, a burly man with long arms that encircled her in an instant. Breath reeking of alcohol swept over her face as the man lifted her off her feet and carried her into the mouth of an alley.

The police were on him immediately, wrenching his arms off her, throwing him face first onto the cobblestones of the street. Police officers swarmed into the alley, all dressed as pimps and beggars, crowding the tight space with smoky torches. One officer pushed Lenore aside, into the arms of another. "Stay here," he said, and then as he ran into the chaos at the center of the alley he shouted to the other man, "Watch her!"

The other man put a hand on her shoulder. He was wearing rags like all the rest and tattered gloves, but through his sleeve Lenore could see the outline of an exceptionally skeletal arm. She looked up, following the line of his arm to his bony shoulders and neck, and from there to a face which, all at once, she remembered. She remembered it hanging over hers, leering, its tongue darting in the corner of its mouth, and she remembered it sprayed with her blood; and she began to scream, but the hand leapt from her shoul-

der to her mouth while another hand pulled her swiftly out of the alley.

If Lenore had screamed; a dozen policemen would have come to her side within seconds. But she did not and they did not, and then she was gone.

The Butcher pushed Lenore roughly through a doorway and along a dark corridor. When they reached another door at the end, the Butcher held Lenore's arms behind her back and unlocked it with his free hand. He forced her through and shut it behind him. Three candles burned in iron mounts, lighting dimly a room of stone walls and a dirt floor. A table in the center of the room had arm and leg shackles. Lenore's eyes slid shut when she saw it. Her legs buckled under her, and she collapsed onto the floor. The Butcher lifted her in his arms and placed her on the table.

He tore off her shawl and threw it aside. She tried to fight him off as he unlaced the front of her dress, but his arms were powerful and she could no more push them from her than she could break the shackles that very shortly held her down. Now she screamed, but now her scream attracted no attention.

She watched the Butcher as he walked around the room. He was tall, over six feet clearly, and gaunt as no other man she had ever seen. His bones stuck out through his skin and through his clothes, as though he had mortified his own flesh as mercilessly as he had his victims'. Over the top of his head he wore a black bandanna, tied so tight that she could see he was bald underneath. The bandanna came down to the bridge of his nose, and below it his eyes sank into his skull like hot coals in a mound of snow. He moved quickly and vigorously, unwrapping a cloth-covered parcel, sliding out a long, metal shaft, and using the cloth to polish it in brisk strokes.

Lenore tried to pull her wrists down through the metal bands. They didn't fit through; but even if they had, there was no chance that she could have freed her feet in the same way. She started to scream again, but when it drew no response even from the Butcher, she stopped.

With each step the Butcher took, a scene from her memories returned. She remembered entering this room, four times, and she remembered four killing strokes that ended hours-long torture sessions. She remembered her screams mixing with his as she watched herself come apart beneath his hands.

With each scene remembered, her terror grew, until, at last, he stood behind her and pulled her head back by the hair, baring her neck for the first stroke.

But as he did so, the Butcher also bared Lenore's forehead and, on it, the complex pattern of the mark of Ibor. He released her hair and stepped around to face her.

"Who are you?" He brandished the stylus at her throat. "Tell me, who did that to you?" His voice was raw and horrible.

Lenore couldn't speak.

"*Who did that to you?*" he screamed. "Tell me!" When Lenore said nothing, he shouted, "You must!" He pressed the point of the stylus into Lenore's throat, releasing a trickle of blood. "Tell me!"

Lenore shook her head.

"Well, you will die all the same," the Butcher said, weeping as he raised the stylus. "You have died before and you will die again." He began to plunge the stylus down, toward her chest.

What happened next Lenore could not see clearly. She heard the wooden door past her feet splinter, she saw a man in a black hood and cloak enter the room, she heard the man cry out an incantation, and then she saw a gold stylus spin through the air and bury itself deep in the Butcher's shoulder. The arm descending with the stylus turned to dust in an instant, the stylus along with it—each held its shape in the air for a second, then fell like a rain of ash on Lenore's chest.

The Butcher turned to face his attacker, but he decomposed in the very act of turning. He leapt at the cloaked man, but fell apart in mid-leap, ending in a heap of larger and smaller pieces on the floor. Only the shoulder with the gold stylus in it and his head remained intact.

The man pulled his cowl back and stepped over to the table. It was Lucas, as Lenore had known it had to be. He collected his stylus and, touching it to the shackles, set Lenore free. "Oh God," Lenore sobbed, "he was ready to kill me."

"I know," Lucas said.

"How did you find me?"

"I followed you all night," Lucas said. "When he grabbed you, I thought you were lost. But then you screamed—your screams were the trail I followed."

Lenore held on to him for a moment in silence. Then she pointed to the mark on her forehead and said, "He wanted me to name you. He knew what this was. How could he?"

Lucas nodded as though he had expected this. He bent over the Butcher's remains and pulled the bandanna off the Butcher's head. Underneath were worn, dark lines very similar to those on Lenore's forehead.

"I'm afraid," Lucas said, "that this is my Uncle Claus."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Lucas said, "if Claus came across my grandfather's records when Grandfather started to tutor him in the art. Just as Lenore recovered her memory when she returned to the scene of her death, Claus must have relived his enormous childhood trauma when he read about how his father brought him back to life. The shock drove him mad . . . it would have done the same to any of us, I think. So Claus made himself the only kind of fashioner he could be—an unfashioner, using his ability to take things apart and destroying himself a little each time he killed someone else."

Captain Breagh wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "It makes sense, as much as any of this makes sense. It's a horror, Lord knows, a horror from beginning to end."

"It's over," Lenore said. They were the first words she had spoken since Captain Breagh had arrived after accompanying Claus's remains to the morgue.

"Thank God for that," Breagh said.

"I wonder," Lucas said, "how many other deaths Claus might have been responsible for along the years, before he ended up in Queensbury Row. Ones he was never connected to. I can't imagine that he just started killing now."

"It's over," Lenore said again. "He is at peace, we are at peace. Let it rest." Her eyes were focused on a spot far off in the distance, beyond the walls of the workshop, beyond the edge of the world. She was not shivering.

"How do you feel?" Lucas asked.

"I feel . . . whole," Lenore said. Her eyes started refocusing on the people in front of her.

"I appreciate what you did, Lenore," Captain Breagh said, standing. He took her hand and shook it. "It took a great deal of courage, and I am certain it saved lives."

"Thank you, captain."

"Certainly." He stepped aside and waited for someone to say something else, but no one did. "Thank you again." He slipped his cap on, wiped his forehead once more, and left.

Lucas took Lenore in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder. They whispered into each other's ears.

"Would you like to go to sleep?"

"No. Not yet."

Lucas could feel her heart still racing under her blouse. "Are you frightened?"

She shook her head.

"Are you angry?"

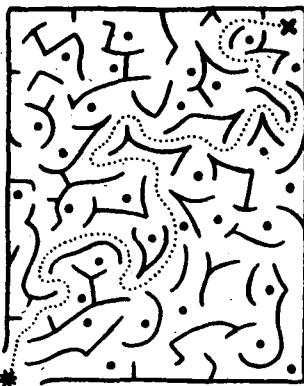
"No."

"Are you worried?"

"I'm warm," Lenore whispered.

And, holding her tight, Lucas could feel that, for the first time, she was.

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":



MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Judge Corroborates

by J. S. Fletcher



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Ever since Dickinson had arrested Gamble on a charge of burglary, he, Dickinson, had carried about with him an uneasy conviction that there was something wrong. The arrest had been made very quietly, and without any fuss, as Gamble emerged from the saloon bar of the Pride of London tavern in Maida Vale one evening, alone. All that the passersby had noticed—if they noticed anything at all—was that two well-dressed men went up to and exchanged a few words with a third well-dressed man, who presently turned and walked off with them, as if they were all friends. But Dickinson remembered what Gamble had said—hence his uneasiness.

"You're making a bloomer, my boy!" said Gamble. "And no error! But—you'll find that out soon enough. In the meantime—"

In the meantime, of course, there was nothing for it but to accompany the two detectives to the nearest police station, and be charged. The charge was that on the night of November twenty-first, he, John Gamble, did feloniously break and enter the dwellinghouse of Martin Philip Tyrrell, in Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, and did steal from thence certain specified property. And once more Gamble had shaken his head—and laughed.

"Not me, sonny," he answered. "On the wrong bus this time! Come off it!"

The detective who had accompanied Dickinson felt curious, and looked at Gamble, who had a reputation, with something more than interest.

"What's your game?" he asked in a quite friendly manner. "Alibi?"

"Something of that sort, old sport," replied Gamble. "You won't get no conviction against yours truly this journey." Then he turned and glanced at Dickinson with a sneer. "Think yourself blooming clever?" he remarked. "Well—you ain't!"

Whatever other people might think, Dickinson knew himself to be clever—he knew, too, that he had exercised a vast amount of pains and ability in his conduct of this particular case. It had been out in his hands from the first, and he had followed it up with the patience and intelligence which had earned him high rank in the Criminal Investigation Department. On the face of it, this was a very ordinary case. Mr. Tyrrell's house, a detached one standing in its own garden, had been burglariously entered on a certain dark night, and silver and jewelry stolen. The burglar had done his work quietly and well, and had got clean away without rousing

any of the household. But he had left a trace—two traces—of his personality. On Mr. Tyrrell's sideboard stood a decanter of whisky, and glasses, and a jug of water—the burglar had not been able to withstand the temptation to take a drink. He had helped himself—and on the sides of the glass from which he had drunk, and on the jug from which he had poured out water, he had left distinct impressions of thumbs and fingers. And Dickinson, who had an extensive and peculiar acquaintance with the higher class cracksmen of the metropolis, and who spent hours in going through fingerprint records, no sooner saw those marks than he said to himself—Jack Gamble!

Jack Gamble also had a reputation. He was a smart chap, who picked up a good living by his wits. When he was not burgling or thieving, he was engaged in other shady transactions, chiefly connected with horses—sometimes he kept inside the law, and now and then he strayed over the edge. One way or another, he had often been in trouble, and at the time of his arrest outside the Pride of London he had not long been restored to liberty after a term of imprisonment. Dickinson had been keeping a patient eye upon him, and when he saw these fingerprints he felt no doubt whatever that Gamble was going to fall into his hands again. He went off and compared the prints carefully with those in the official keeping, and that done he did a little quiet and secret work in finding out what Gamble's movements had been on the night of the burglary. When he discovered that Gamble had been out most of that night, leaving his lodging at ten o'clock and not returning until six next morning, he proceeded to act—for Dickinson was one of the most convinced of believers in the fingerprint theory and system, and he was able, by enthusiasm, to infect others with his faith.

Nevertheless, now that he had got him safely under lock and key, Dickinson was upset by Gamble's cheerfulness. He kept seeing Gamble. He saw him when Gamble was before the magistrate—who, though apparently not quite such a firm believer in the fingerprint theory as he might have been, was sufficiently convinced by the evidence to send Gamble for trial. And Gamble, awaiting removal to a detention prison until the next sitting at the Central Criminal Court, nodded affably to Dickinson, who had gone down to the cells at the police court to take a look at him.

"Think you're steaming ahead all right, old cock, don't yer?" remarked Gamble. "So don't I! You're going to get thrown clear off

the line, presently—see! And, I say!—when will the little affair come off? What—next week? You don't happen to know who the old bloke on the bench'll be, do yer, Mr. Dickinson?"

Dickinson believed in being on good and even friendly terms with the criminals who came under his notice; he adopted a sort of indulgent schoolmaster attitude to them.

"Your case'll most likely come before Mr. Justice Stapleton," he answered good-humoredly, "and you'll have to make that alibi you've been hinting at a pretty good one to convince him, my lad! What're you laughing at?"

For Gamble had begun to chuckle, as if some highly humorous notion had suddenly occurred to him. Before he could explain, certain peremptory officials motioned him and certain other committed and remanded gentlemen to step towards the open door of Black Maria, drawn up in the yard outside. Gamble went off, still chuckling. "See you later then, Mr. Dickinson," he said as he went. "Meet you at the CCC next week. And you won't have half a surprise, either!"

That made Dickinson all the more uneasy—and suspicious. Gamble had adopted a queer, half-contemptuous, defiant attitude before the magistrate. He had not even taken the trouble to employ a certain smart man of law who had defended him more than once—and had once actually restored him to such friends and relations as he happened to possess. He had listened to the fingerprint evidence and the proof of his being absent from his lodgings with sneering eyes and lips. Asked what he had got to say, he replied that he'd say what he had to say at the proper time and place—"and not half, neither, as they'd find out." Altogether, he had shown such certainty that Dickinson was beginning to feel afraid, and perhaps a little doubtful. But he fell back on the hard theory—*no two fingerprints are alike*—and he was dead certain that the marks left on Mr. Tyrrell's glass and jug were those of Jack Gamble's fingers.

2

It was nothing but expert and circumstantial evidence against Gamble when his case came on at the Central Criminal Court before Mr. Justice Stapleton and a common jury. Indeed, what was really being tried, in the opinion of at least one spectator, was not Gamble, but the fingerprint theory.

The fingerprints in question were passing for an hour or two between the bench and the jury box, the jury box and the barristers' table; for another hour or two, experts were giving opinions, pointing out technicalities, expatiating learnedly on the theories and practice of such authorities as Bertillon, Herschel, Galton, and Henry. And Gamble sat in the dock—having been courteously accommodated with a seat in view of the probable length of the case—and listened with a half-scornful, half-bored expression.

Once more he had pleaded his innocence; once more declined to be represented by anybody but himself. But he had asked, with some eagerness, if he could give evidence on his own behalf, and call a witness, and on hearing that he could—a fact of which he was already aware—had smiled and winked derisively at Detective-Sergeant Dickinson.

It all came to an end at last—the case for the prosecution. Every one of the experts had sworn that the marks of thumbs and fingers on Mr. Tyrrell's property were, in their belief, as experts, correspondent to those stamped by the prisoner in more than one official record. Evidence had been brought forward to show that Gamble was away from his lodgings during the hours at some period of which the burglary had undoubtedly been committed.

It was, perhaps, not a very strong case; the stolen property had not been traced, nor had a single article of it been found in the prisoner's possession; nor was there any evidence to show that he had disposed of valuable goods about that time. But—though nothing of the sort was mentioned in court, in accordance with the strict principles of British justice, which takes every case on its own merits—it was generally known, even by the judge and jury-men, who are supposed to know nothing, that Gamble was as expert in these sorts of things as the fingerprint experts were clever in theirs, and most persons present expected to hear him found guilty and sent to penal servitude again.

Except Dickinson. Dickinson, after giving his own evidence, had taken a seat in a corner, whence he watched the man in the dock suspiciously and moodily.

Dickinson did not like the look of Gamble; Gamble was altogether too indifferent, too bored, too superior to his situation. He made Dickinson think of a cardplayer who holds all the aces—and has another card ready up his sleeve.

And when Gamble was called upon for his defense, and made his way back from dock to witness box, smiling, Dickinson felt a bit

sick; he wanted to convict Gamble, and he began to have an idea that Gamble was going to put a stop to that game. Yet—how?

Gamble took the oath as piously as if he had done little else but practice religious observance all his life. Possibly he felt unusually serious at that moment. At any rate, it was with an air of great decorum that he turned to the judge, who was watching him curiously.

"As I ain't represented by counsel, my lord," said Gamble, "perhaps your lordship'll let me tell my tale in my own way? Sworn evidence, my lord."

"Certainly, tell your own story after your own fashion," answered his lordship. "You are probably quite well aware that you can be examined by the prosecution on whatever you say?"

"Quite aware o' that, my lord," replied Gamble cheerfully, and smiled on the barristers in front of him. "Any of these here gentlemen is quite welcome—or your lordship, either—to ask me any questions as seem to occur to 'em—or to you either, my lord." He paused, and transferred his smile to the twelve open-mouthed men in the jury box. "Well, my lord and gentlemen of the jury, what I have to say to this here charge is—an alibi! I'm going to prove an alibi, and when I've finished proving it, I expect to be discharged, and no other. Fingerprints or no fingerprints, I wasn't within six miles of St. John's Wood at any time of the night on which this here burglary was carried out. Why? 'Cause I was somewhere else."

Gamble, from long experience of criminal courts, either as principal actor or interested spectator, was well aware of the importance in oratory of a dramatic pause, and he made one now, leaning over the edge of the witness box and glancing around him with a calm and triumphant smile. And suddenly he drew himself up and began to check off his points on the tips of his stubby fingers.

"To start with, gentlemen," he continued, "the charge against me is that I broke into this house in Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, on the night of November twenty-first last, according to the evidence, between ten o'clock—that 'ud be the evening of November twentieth—and six next morning. Gentlemen, from ten o'clock in the evening of November twentieth until five thirty next morning, *I was in Wimbledon.*"

Gamble spoke the last word in a thrilling whisper, and the judge started and glanced sharply at him.

"You were—where did you say?" he asked, bending towards the prisoner.

"Wimbledon, my lord!" answered Gamble, loudly and promptly. "Wimbledon. Where your lordship resides."

The judge started again and frowned. It was quite true that he did live at Wimbledon, in a pretty old house on the common, and his frown meant that he was not quite sure that he was pleased to hear that Mr. John Gamble had been in that select neighborhood.

"Continue your evidence," he said, a little sharply. "You were saying—"

"That I was at Wimbledon that night, my lord," replied Gamble, with a smile that sought out Dickinson in his corner. "At Wimbledon—part of the time, anyway—and t'other part of the time on Wimbledon Common. And, gentlemen," he went on, with a dramatic turn in the direction of the jury box, "why was I at Wimbledon? Gentlemen, I'm here to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so—out with it. I went to Wimbledon for an unlawful purpose—which never came off."

Gamble let this soak into the atmosphere with another dramatic pause—made suddenly. He set out again just as suddenly—with an outstretched finger pointed at the foreman of the jury, a fat man whose eyes goggled.

"Mind you," he said. "I'm a-going to tell the truth against myself—to clear myself of this 'ere particular charge. Now, it's quite true—I ain't going to deny it, for it 'ud be of no use to—I've been in trouble before on little matters of this sort. I got over the results of one of 'em—the last—on'y last October. And says I to myself, I'll chuck that game—tain't no good, when all's taken into account. But about November seventeenth or eighteenth—I can't be sure to a day—a friend of mine who knew my abilities in this 'ere line meets me one day in Long Acre, where I was looking after a bit of horseflesh, and says he to me, confidential, 'Jack, my boy,' he says, 'if so be as you wants a nice soft job in your line what you could work on your own without a partner,' he says, 'blimey if I can't put you up to the very thing!' he says. 'What is it?' says I. 'I ain't particular for any job, but of course if it's something very soft—' 'You could do it standing on yer blooming head,' he says. 'It's this 'ere. You know I live down at Wimbledon?' 'Certainly I do,' says I. 'Well,' says he, 'there's an old bloke has a very nice house on Wimbledon Common what you may be acquainted with—professional,' he says. 'Which I mean Mr. Justice Stapleton.'"

Mr. Justice Stapleton, who had been obviously fidgeting for some minutes, turned a very red face on Gamble.

"I hope you're not trifling with the court, prisoner?" he remarked acidly. "In the circumstances you must have every indulgence, but—"

"It's all gospel truth, my lord," answered Gamble reassuringly. "Your lordship'll see it in a minute—can't give my evidence no other way, my lord. Well," he continued triumphantly, and the judge leaned back with an air of patient resignation, "well, gentlemen, that's what this here friend of mine—which I shan't give his name and address, nor call him—unless strictly necessary—said. 'Mr. Justice Stapleton,' he says. 'The old bird,' he says, 'is one o' them folks as doesn't draw their front blinds down o' nights, and many's the time,' he says, 'as I've passed the window of his dining room, and looked in when all the lights was ablazing, and his lordship getting his grub. And,' says he, 'he's a sideboard that's just creaking under gold and silver cups and plates, and that sort o' thing. I understand,' he says, 'as how his lordship was a bit of an athlete when he was a young 'un, and won a lot o' pots, and then he's won more in steeplechasing. Anyway,' he says, 'there's enough stuff on that sideboard, Jack, to make it worth your while to pay the old chap a quiet visit—see?'"

"Well, gentlemen, of course nature is nature, and when I hears this, I thinks to myself—well, it 'ud be no harm to go down to Wimbledon Common and reconnoiter, as they term it. And so, about nine o'clock in the evening of November twentieth last—you'll be particular about that date, gentlemen!—I went down to Wimbledon, and I met this 'ere friend o' mine, and we took a quiet walk along by the house he spoke of—your lordship's."

Gamble turned suddenly on the judge, and the eyes of every man in court turned there, too. It was very evident that Mr. Justice Stapleton was not so much annoyed as puzzled. He was looking at the prisoner with a queer, inquisitive, searching expression, and for an instant seemed about to speak—instead, he signed to him to proceed. And Gamble smiled and proceeded.

"Well, gentlemen, it was just as this 'ere friend o' mine—a truthful gentleman, he is!—had said," he continued. "His lordship's house stands back a bit—not much—from the road at the side of the common. His dining room windows front the road. And as my friend had said, the blinds wasn't drawn—and we could see right in. Now I'll invite his lordship's particular attention to what me and my friend saw. There was a full blaze of electric light in the room; there was also an uncommonly fine fire in a big hearth. The

sideboard at the back—black oak—was crammed with gold and silver plate—salvers, cups, vases, such like; it fairly shone and sparkled in the light. And in that room there were three people—a sitting in easy chairs in front o' the-fire. Perhaps his lordship'll now take notice of how I describe 'em. One of 'em was his lordship himself, in his evening finery—no need to describe him. Another was a lady—his lordship's lady, I took her to be—she was knitting—made me think of my old mother, gentlemen, she looked that peaceful. And the third—

Mr. Justice Stapleton leaned slightly towards the witness box and appeared to listen eagerly for the next words. Gamble gave him a sharp glance out of his eye-corners as he proceeded.

"The third," he said, "was a tall, very fine-looking old gentleman, foreigner by the look of him, with a pointed white beard and waxed mustaches, and sat between the other two at the hearthrug, smoking a big cigar. He was in evening clothes, too, and he'd a red ribbon round his neck, with a sort of star or medal hanging from it. A very peaceful, nice group they was—with their cigars and their glasses."

Mr. Justice Stapleton, with an odd look at the members of the bar, suddenly sat upright again and, plunging his hand through his robes into some inner pocket, pulled out what was evidently a pocket or memorandum book which he laid on the desk before him. And Gamble paused—but a nod of the judicial wig motioned him to go on.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, eyeing the fat foreman with approval, "me and my friend we saw all this, and then we went on, quietly, and we had a drink or two, and then we went home to his house and took a bit o' supper. And when that was over: 'What d'yer think o' this job, Jack?' says he. 'Softish 'un, ain't it?' he says. 'Leastways to a gentleman o' your ability,' says he. 'Might be,' says I, 'but I'd like to take a look round the premises when things is quiet,' I says. 'Just to see how things is, yer know,' I says. 'Well, there ain't neither dog nor cat in that house,' says he. 'His lordship can't abide 'em.' 'Cats,' says I, 'don't count—I've done many a bit o' business with a couple o' cats lookin' on, interested like. But dogs is different. You're sure there ain't no dogs?' 'Not a dog,' says he. 'I knows! Horses is his lordship's 'obby—dogs he will not have!' 'All right,' says I. 'Then we'll just sit here a bit—say till it's past midnight, and then—well, I'll just prospect a bit. Not,' I says, 'as I shall operate tonight, but I'll just take a look at doors and windows.'

So, of course, we had a drop of something comforting on that, and we talked about one thing and another, and at half-past twelve I went back, through them bushes which is so convenient, to take a look round his lordship's house in the dark."

Mr. Justice Stapleton had opened his little book by that time, consulted some entry in it, and shut it up again. He was now leaning his chin on his hand, watching Gamble with a mingling of keenness and amusement, and he so continued to watch him while the accused went cheerfully on his way. And Gamble resumed his candid narrative with something that was very like a wink at the jury.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, leaning still farther over the edge of the witness box as if to take the whole court into his confidence more fully, "you see that I'm being open and truthful with you, from the mere fact that I'm giving myself away! For, of course, the instant I entered his lordship's garden, I was where I oughtn't to ha' been—with intent to commit a felony. Only—I didn't intend to commit it just then—maybe not for a night or two—I only just wanted to look round. And I did look round—careful. I took a look at doors and windows—back, front, and side. I satisfied myself there wasn't no blooming dog. And eventual, I took a carefuller look at the window of the dining room where all that plate was spread out on the sideboard. And while I was engaged at that, and quiet as a mouse, there was a light suddenly shone in on that room, and in walks his lordship there, a-carrying a bedroom candle. And to prove to you—and to him—that I saw him, he was wearing pink and white striped pajamas, and he'd a white woollen shawl tied round his throat. I ask you, gentlemen, and I asks his lordship—how could I ha' seen them little details if I hadn't been there?"

Here followed another dramatic pause, during which Gamble took a calmly disdainful look at Dickinson. Amidst a dead silence, he went on:

"And more than that, gentlemen! A second later, in comes the other old gentleman," he said. "Him with the pointed white beard and waxed mustache. He was in a dressing gown—a bright red 'un, with a black cord round the middle. And he'd a candle, too, and I saw at once that both of 'em had been roused by something that I couldn't account for—for I'd certainly made no noise as I knew of, and was only looking through the window. They both talked a bit—then his lordship went out into the hall, and a second

later looked in again with a big overcoat on, and a bull's-eye lantern in his hand; and at that, gentlemen, I made myself scarce, and hopped it out of the garden and in amongst the trees at the other side of the road. I hadn't been there two minutes when a policeman comes along, and I heard his lordship call him from the front door—whereupon I went off across the common and back to my friend's house. And there I stopped until the workmen's trains started running—and then I took one home to London. And—there you are! And now I asks all present—how could I ha' been in Avenue Road any time that night, when I was down at Wimbledon, miles and miles away? And I asks more—I asks his lordship there, as a gentleman, to corroborate what I've said—for he can!"

The attention of the court shifted itself from the prisoner to the judge. Every eye was turned on Mr. Justice Stapleton as he slowly drew himself up and looked over his spectacles at Gamble, and from him to the prosecuting solicitor.

"This is certainly a very remarkable statement on the part of the prisoner," he began. "He puts me in a very curious situation. I am really being asked to be witness as well as judge. If this case had been tried by one of my brother judges, the prisoner would, I suppose, have raised the same defense, and called me as a witness on his behalf. Really I am somewhat at a loss—but I may as well tell you that I believe what the prisoner has just told us to be perfectly true. It is quite true that I have a prejudice—a lifelong one and possibly a very foolish one—against drawing blinds and curtains over my windows. It is also true that I have a quantity of gold and silver plate on my sideboard, and that it can be seen, I daresay, from the road outside at night, when there is a strong light in that room. I don't attach much importance—in the present matter—to these details; the prisoner might easily have gained as much knowledge at any time. But"—here his lordship picked up his little book—"it is impossible to deny that certain events took place at my house on the night of November twentieth and twenty-first exactly as the prisoner has set them out. On that night I had an old friend of mine, Monsieur Paul Lavonier, a famous French scientist, to dine and sleep there. In appearance he is precisely as the prisoner describes him—he was certainly wearing the collar and star of a much-prized decoration. It is quite true that at, or about, one o'clock in the morning I fancied I heard a sound in my garden, and that I went down to the dining room; it is quite true that my attire was as the prisoner says. It is true, also, that M.

Lavonier came down also, in such a garment as the prisoner spoke of. It is also true that I put on an overcoat, lighted a lantern which I keep in my hall, opened the front door, and hailed a passing constable, who afterwards looked around the grounds and found nothing suspicious. And, frankly," continued the judge, glancing with a shrewd and humorous smile, "I do not see how this man who undoubtedly witnessed these things at my house on Wimbledon Common on the night in question could possibly have committed a burglary in the north of London at the same time. It might be suggested that he left Wimbledon at once on being baffled at my house, at or about one o'clock, and proceeded straight to Avenue Road. But you will remember, gentlemen of the jury, that, according to Mr. Tyrrell's evidence, Mr. Tyrrell himself was up until two o'clock that morning, that he only went to bed for two hours, as he had to catch a train at King's Cross, and that burglary at his house certainly took place between two and four. Now, there are no trains from Wimbledon to town at that time of night and it is extremely improbable that the prisoner could get from one point—my house, where he certainly was about a quarter or half-past one—to another, many miles away, before four. I am, of course, informally corroborating the prisoner's evidence—I really don't see that I can avoid doing so in this particular and extraordinary situation. The case against the prisoner rests entirely on these fingerprints—I shall make some remarks on that matter presently." He glanced at the prosecuting counsel. "Do you wish to ask this man anything?" he inquired.

"If your lordship pleases," answered the barrister addressed, who was plainly taken aback.

He turned to Gamble. "Why didn't you tell all this before the magistrate?" he demanded.

"Because I preferred to tell it here," retorted Gamble.

"Did you know that his lordship was going to try this case?"

"Not till Dickinson told me—after I'd been committed," said Gamble, pointing at the detective.

"Were you intending to call his lordship as a witness, then?" asked the counsel.

"What do you think?" sneered Gamble. "'Course I was!"

"Why haven't you called that friend of yours at Wimbledon?"

"What?" exclaimed Gamble. "To give him away for putting me on to the job? Not likely; he's a highly respectable man, he is, as keeps a shop down there."

"You need not have let us know that he put you on to the job—this respectable shopkeeper!" retorted the counsel. "You could have called him to prove that you spent most of the night with him at Wimbledon, without saying why. What proof have you, besides what you've said, that you ever were at Wimbledon?"

Gamble smiled, and suddenly thrust his fingers into his waistcoat pocket. There was evidently a hole in its lining, and after some fumbling and fishing, he extracted something which he held up, and then passed in the direction of the bench.

"That!" he said. "Ticket from Wimbledon to Waterloo. They didn't take it, and I didn't give it up. Look at the date!"

There was some consultation between the bench and the bar, and then his lordship, taking off his spectacles, turned leisurely to the jury and began to talk about the fingerprint system. And Dickinson frowned and nudged a fellow detective who sat by him. For he knew that Mr. Justice Stapleton was a good deal of a skeptic about that system, and had more than once made caustic remarks about it and its exponents, and he expected what precisely came to pass within the next twenty minutes. For the jury returned a verdict of "not guilty" and Gamble walked out of the dock a free man once more.

And once free, Gamble sought out Dickinson in the precincts of the court and openly sneered at him.

"What did I tell yer, Mr. Clever?" he said, making a face at the detective. "Didn't I say you were making a bloomer this time? Yah!"

"It's you that's the clever man, my lad," answered Dickinson. "You've done me—and everybody—somehow. I wouldn't mind giving you a fiver to be let into the secret."

But Gamble only made another face and took himself off for a much-needed drink.

3

Dickinson was as certain that Gamble had bamboozled the court as he was certain that Gamble was the culprit in the Avenue Road affair. But as to how Gamble had managed it, he was utterly at a loss to conceive. He kept an eye on him for some time, and whenever they met, Gamble winked at him derisively. The derision signified not so much a reference to what had just occurred as to the fact that Gamble was going on the straight, and giving Dickin-

son no chance to get at him. Dickinson, narrowly as he watched and listened, could hear nothing, until, suddenly, he missed his man. Gamble was no longer seen in his usual haunts—he made a complete disappearance. And it was not until he had been gone for some time, and Dickinson had failed to gain news of him, that he heard something from one of those strange individuals who hover between criminals and criminal-catchers, and who, being neither, have none of the honor that exists even amongst thieves. This man, being in conversation with Dickinson, suddenly turned to the subject that still rankled in the detective's mind. •

"You ain't seen nothing of Jack Gamble of late, I reckon?" he observed. "And you won't—no more. Made a clean wipe of the slate, Jack has; gone to Australia, he has, with a mate—horse dealing—for good. On the straight, you understand?"

"That's it, is it?" remarked Dickinson.

"That's it, sir," asserted the other, and laughed as at some pleasant thought. "He done you a fair treat over that Avenue Road affair, didn't he now? Of course, there was them as knew how it was done, me amongst 'em. And now that old Jack's t'other side of the world, I don't mind telling you, between you and me, private.

"It was like this here. When Jack came home after that last stretch, him and another mate of his looked round for some likely cribs to crack. One of 'em was that house in Avenue Road, and another was the judge's place near Wimbledon Common. They settled to do 'em the same night. Jack did the Avenue Road business, right enough; t'other man went to Wimbledon, and his job didn't come off. It was him—t'other man—as had all the adventures that Jack told in court! He primed Jack with all the points next day, down to every detail, giving him that ticket, and it was agreed between 'em that if either of 'em got took in connection with the Avenue Road affair, which it was was to make use of the Wimbledon knowledge to get up an alibi. It happened to be Jack, and him having a particular good memory, he just reeled off all that had happened to the other chap as if it had been to himself, see? Nice, simple thing—what, Mr. Dickinson?"

Mr. Dickinson replied briefly that he had always known Jack Gamble to be a clever man, and retired—to visit Mr. Justice Stapleton, and add to that learned gentleman's stock of knowledge.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



R. D. Zimmerman was nominated for an Edgar for his last novel, *Deadfall in Berlin*. Now there is **Death Trance** (Morrow, \$20), and it's mesmerizing. It introduces a new sleuthing team of siblings. Maddy is a forensic hypnotist who has learned to overcome her blindness only to be struck down by a reckless driver. Confined to a wheelchair, she has withdrawn to the family's isolated home. There Alex travels to seek his big sister's help: he needs to remember the events leading up to the murder of an old girlfriend. Finely crafted, elegantly written, this is a twisted tale of tragically squandered affections and victory against great odds, of dark secrets and misplaced trust. It's a novel of sheer suspense—it takes off at a run and never lets up, grabbing the reader by the throat on a chase for a killer around Minnesota's Twin Cities and fastening onto an achingly beautiful island mansion on Lake Michigan.

Death in a Serene City was Edward Sklepowich's presentation of Urbino Macintyre, an expatriate young American writer who lives in an inherited palazzo in Venice. Look for it now in paperback (Avon, \$4.50). Urbino's best friend is an American who married a count many years before and came to live in Venice. Now a widow, it was the contessa who befriended the young American writer, who first came to the closed society of Venice to begin a new life. Urbino feels that he owes the contessa, so he agrees to her request to help a small local church recover its patron saint's remains, taken in a robbery that resulted in the death of the church's cleaning lady, a woman also employed by the contessa. This is urbane, civilized, and strongly written—and much cheaper

than plane fare to beautiful Venice, which Sklepowich endows with all the detail of a major character.

Also back in print in paperback is Edmund Crispin's classic crime farce, **The Moving Toyshop** (Penguin, \$5.95). This is a Gervase Fen caper; Fen is an Oxford don with a droll wit and little patience for fools. This time he's searching for a corpse—only to find that the entire murder scene has apparently disappeared overnight. The clever premise, Crispin's crisp quips, and a chase scene through Oxford's sedate streets that's worthy of Max Sennett put this on many reviewers' Top 10 lists, mine included.

Ellen Hart goes backstage in **Stage Fright**, her third mystery featuring Minneapolis restaurateur Jane Lawless (*Hallowed Murder; Vital Lies*). Hart gives readers a peek at the professional life of Jane's irrepressible sidekick, Cordelia Thorn, the artistic director of the Allen Grimby Theater. Cordelia is a character who lights up the stage every time she walks on. But her decision to produce a new play by Antonia Werness unwittingly brings the curtain up on a dark family drama. It apparently centers around Gaylord Werness, Antonia's father, a hugely successful playwright who has become an icon of modern American drama. As minor players enter, the plot thickens. There's Antonia's brother Torald, once a promising actor and now a confirmed alcoholic; his oddly shy sister Lucy; and an ambitious young actor and his wife whom Cordelia, in her infinite wisdom, has foisted off on Jane as tenants. Hart deftly turns the spotlight on the dusty secrets and shadowy souls of a prominent theater family, and the resulting mystery is worthy of a standing ovation. (Seal Press, \$9.95)

China Bayles was on a fast track at a big Houston law firm when she decided to get off the treadmill. Now she owns a little herb shop in the friendly town of Pecan Springs, and the success of her teas and wreaths and herbal potions is beginning to take care of her anxieties about next month's rent. Soon, however, she has new worries. One of her good friends suddenly dies, and the police are calling it suicide. The woman's grown daughter denies it, and China does find some love letters in the woman's effects that nag at the suspicious mind of the crackerjack attorney she used to be. As it becomes painfully clear that Pecan Springs isn't immune to evil, China discovers that she can't feel the same about her new life until she can find the evil's source. If you're a fan of Nancy Pickard and Sarah Shankman, read Susan Wittig Albert's **Thyme of Death** (Scribners, \$19). Then join me in eagerly waiting for the sequel.

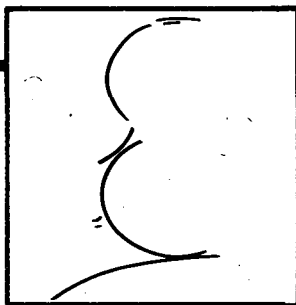
Dorothy Cannell's Ellie and Ben capers (*The Thin Woman*, *The Widows Club*, *Mum's the Word*) defy my best efforts to categorize them. I can state that her newest, **Femmes Fatal**, will have fans weeping with laughter. Again. After the birth of twins, Ellie finds herself too easily resisting the charms of her dashing and devoted husband Ben. Is lust lost forever? is her constant (yet unspoken) refrain. Still, there's no way she would have debased herself by willingly joining Fully Female, a new local spa complete with self-help workshops that promise to teach the matrons of her British village to "become the woman he always wanted." But her cleaning lady has threatened to commit suicide in her parlor, you see . . . well, it's a long story. It always is with Ellie. Along the way readers will feast on a concoction of romance, wickedly barbed satire, and wacky plot twists, with the delightfully oddball Ellie as their dinner companion. (Bantam, \$19.50)

Patricia Cornwell's suspense novels featuring chief medical examiner Dr. Kay Scarpetta are excellent. I believe her third, **All That Remains** (Scribners, \$20), may be her best yet. Kay is part of a manhunt to capture the perpetrator of what the press is calling "The Couple Killings." Eight young people went out for a good time, only to meet up instead with a stranger who had far different plans. Cornwell turns up the burner when the next victim is identified as the daughter of a prominent Washington politician, a woman who suggests that her political enemies may have had a hand in the crime. Then an old friend and a former boyfriend tangle the thread further: Abby is increasingly paranoid about the investigative report she's been working on for her Washington daily; Mark perhaps knows what the FBI is holding back. The tension is relentless, and Kay is a strong, sensible, and sensitive character with a nose for crimesolving.

"Families. Either they love you too much or they don't love you enough. No wonder they're called nuclear." So narrates London P.I. Hannah Wolfe as she begins her search for a young ballerina who's disappeared. Hannah wants to believe that Carolyn is on an adventure, too happy and preoccupied to keep up her correspondence with the forbidding, elderly dancing teacher who adopted her as a young girl in order to groom her for the career the older woman never had. Then the girl's body turns up in the Thames. Hannah is very independent, very quick, and not at all cute or coy. **Birth Marks** by Sarah Dunant is her debut, but I predict we'll be seeing her again. (Doubleday Perfect Crime, \$17)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Richard and Priscilla Parker are a perfect and happy couple. They live in a large house in a well-kept suburban subdivision and can afford to send their talented daughter to a prestigious music boarding school. To top it off, they're as handsome as handsome can be—Kevin Kline and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio do make a goodlooking couple.

When **Consenting Adults** begins, the Parkers' biggest trouble is coping with the traffic they encounter during their commute. Their perfect lives take a turn when new neighbors move in next door. We're introduced to Eddy Otis (Kevin Spacey) when he rides a motorcycle out of the moving van and across his lawn. Eddy, we learn, was in insurance but now works as a "financial advisor." Look out for those finan-

cial advisors. Kay Otis (Rebecca Miller), his wife, is a well-built, sultry blonde who likes to sing the blues. Look out for those blues singers.

Richard is a commercial jingle composer—it's a living—although he'd really like to play blues at a local club. And when Kay does a torch song to his piano, a fire is lit under him that he can't extinguish. Listen to the song she sings. It may clue you in on what's about to happen.

The Parkers and their exhilarating new neighbors become fast friends. Richard and Eddy jog together; they go to the gym together. They all go out on the Otises' boat; they picnic. They even play softball together. Eddy brags of his adventures, but Richard has none to brag about.

Eddy insists he can make loads of money for them with

his investments, and when Richard confides he's some twenty-five thousand dollars in debt, Eddy fixes it in a less-than-legitimate fashion.

Priscilla, who is kind of one-dimensional, is still pretty one-dimensional, but does perk up when hanging out with Eddy. She says she feels alive.

Since Richard has been looking at Kay and Eddy has been looking at Priscilla, the new neighbor proposes something outrageous. Would their wives notice, he asks, if the two men got up from their beds in the middle of the night, switched places, and made love to the other's wife?

Although intrigued with the possibility, Richard knows it's wrong and doesn't want to risk his marriage. Eddy taunts him, calling him a wimp. "You think you can be alive without taking any risks?" he demands. He hounds him with the idea until Richard finally stops hanging around with him. Still, he longingly watches Kay from his window, which affords him a view through her window. *Rear Window*, anyone?

When Priscilla finds herself cut off from the neighbors, she's furious. Of course, she isn't privy to the one-night wife-swapping proposal. "Something went missing from this marriage, and for a while we

had it back again," Priscilla scolds her faithful husband. "When was the last time you took a risk?" she queries.

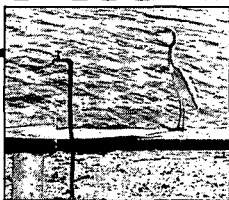
That's it, Richard thinks. And he agrees to the late-night switcheroo. Only then does the fun really begin.

Suffice it to say, there's a murder, and it must be solved. Two of the best-acted roles in the film pop up at this point. Veteran actor E. G. Marshall plays the craggy Southern gentleman defense attorney George Gordon. Forest Whitaker contributes as the laconic investigator. The whole second part of the film has a backwater, old South feel that adds some heavy atmosphere. Marshall and Whitaker help create that atmosphere, and it's unfortunate they're given so little to do and so little time on screen to do it.

As for the others, Kevin Spacey is given the most to work with and does well. He is exuberant and driven and just hyperactive enough that he might be called Crazy Eddy. Kevin Kline also does well with a role in which he develops from clean-cut milquetoast to stubble-faced desperado.

The whodunit in *Consenting Adults* is easy enough to figure out. But the how-to-get whodunit is an entertaining journey.

THE STORY THAT WON



The October Mysterious Photo-
Avonelle Kelsey of Carlsbad,
tions go to Bernadette Smith
ada; Dana Tweedy of Cham-
Bruce DeVenne of Halifax,
Cayer of Salt Lake City,
of Seal Beach, California; Millie Schwab of San Diego, California; C. V. Klein of
New York, New York; Andy Dequasie of Pownal; Vermont; Tonnie Goddard Moon
of Chattanooga, Tennessee; Norman E. Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin; Stuart Bry-
nien of Brooklyn, New York; and Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

tograph contest was won by
California. Honorable men-
of Calgary, Alberta, Can-
bersburg, Pennsylvania;
Nova Scotia, Canada; Rita
Utah; Robert W. Alexander
of Chattanooga, Tennessee; Norman E. Glovsky of Ashland, Wisconsin; Stuart Bry-
nien of Brooklyn, New York; and Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

WHITE by Avonelle Kelsey

"I may not be a Jessica Fletcher or Ellery Queen but I know when somethin' don't seem right," Millie told her yawning husband. "Come over here and look out."

Still holding his coffee cup, anxious to get at his newspaper, he wandered to the window.

"Looks same to me. The bench, the bird, the water and sand."

"Where's the widow in white?"

"How should I know?"

"Well. Every morning while I do the dishes, she sits there and feeds that dang bird. He's waitin' for her now."

"Let him wait." Howard retrieved the newspaper from the front door and glanced uneasily across the road. Except for the two summer cottages, this part of the beach was isolated. Everything looked the same to him. He settled down at the dinette table, unfolded his newspaper, and, after another glance at the sand and water, sank down behind it.

"And another thing," Annie continued, "the flower. When she fed that bird and the sun showed white on the sand, the only color besides the water and orange pipe was the flower."

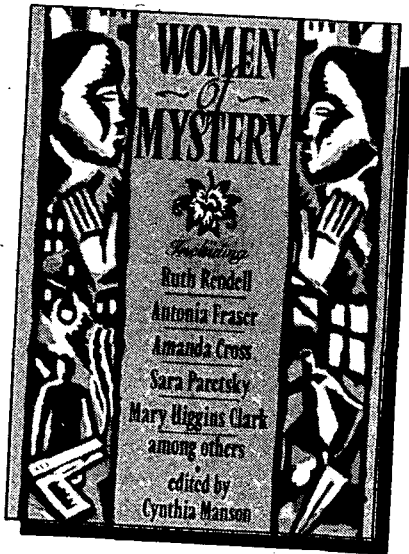
"If you'll shut up about the flower, I'll buy you a bouquet. The woman probably went on a trip." Howard went back to his paper.

After awhile, he sighed, put it down, and went into the garage to get another spade. He might as well help Annie dig. She was a good wife, except for her curiosity.

When they reached the body of the white widow, he'd have to kill her, too.

Photo by Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

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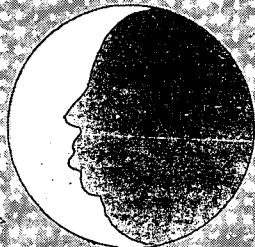
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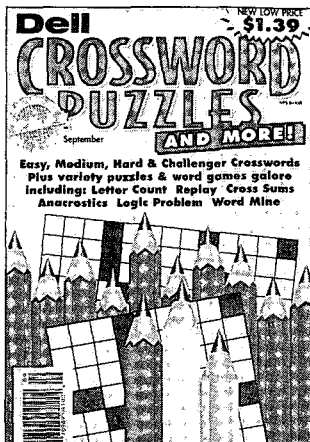
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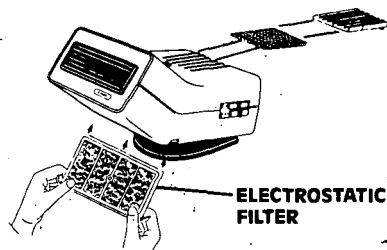
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TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in () payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** Dept. 023 AH ; P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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